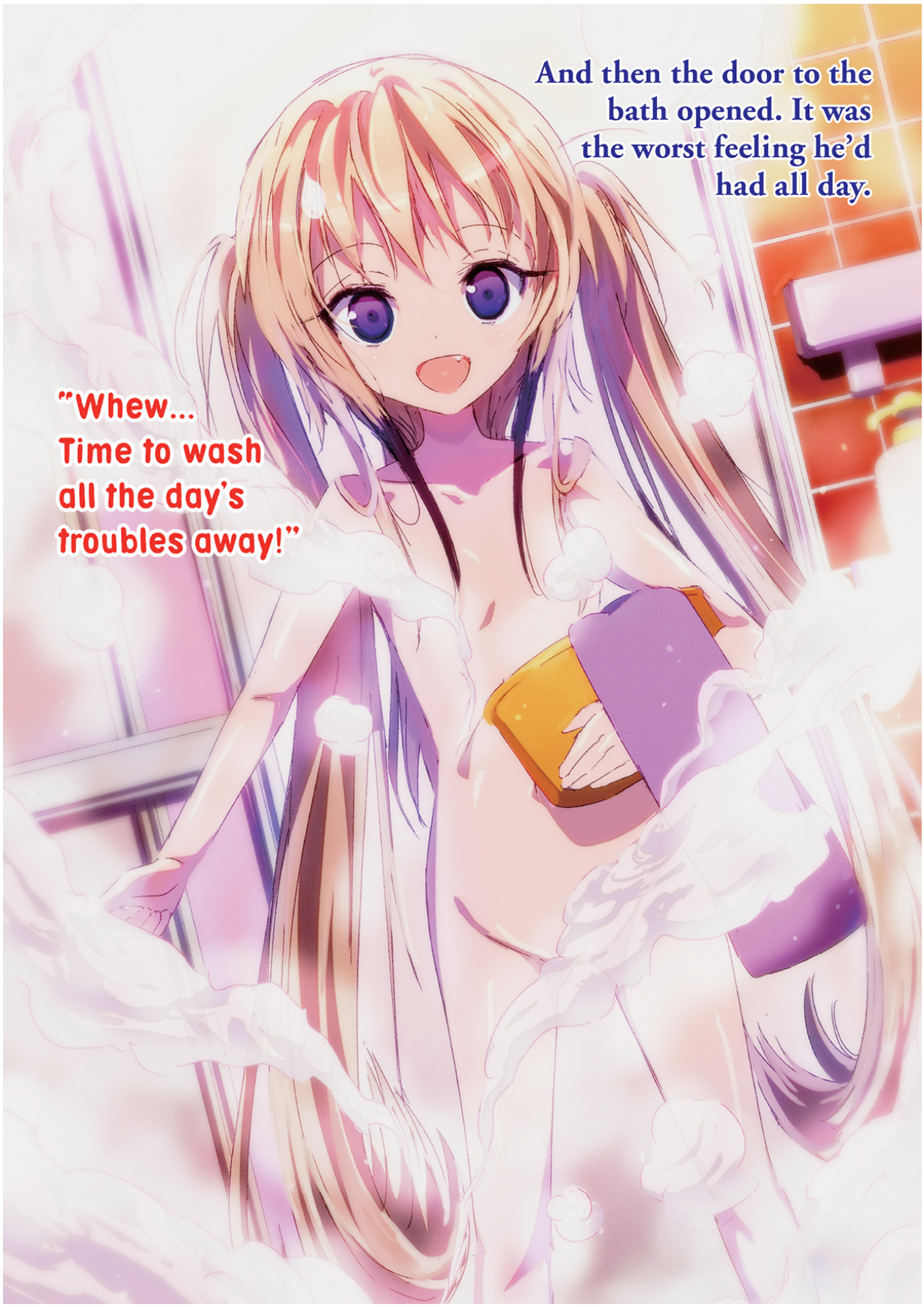
You call That Service?
2
Kisetsu Morita
Illustration by
Hiroki Ozaki

You call
That
Service

©Hiroki Ozaki


And then the door to the bath opened. It was the worst feeling he'd had all day.
"Whew... Time to wash all the day's troubles away!"

©Hiroki Ozaki

Inside was a photo of Ouka and Ryouta
from elementary school.
"—Because we're old friends."

©Hiroki Ozaki

CONTENTS

©Hiroki Ozaki

Prologue

Episode 1 LET'S LEAD A HIGH SCHOOL LIFE WITH ENEMIES ON ALL SIDES!

Episode 2 LET'S ESCAPE THIS ENEMY-RIDDLED HIGH SCHOOL LIFE!

Episode 3 LET'S CURSE BIG SIS!

Episode 4 LET'S HAVE A TOUR OF THE ROYAL CASTLE!

Episode 5 LET'S CHAT WITH REI FOR THE FIRST TIME IN FOREVER!

Episode 6 LET'S SAVE BIG SIS!

Epilogue

©Hiroki Ozaki

Shiren Fuyukura

©Hiroki Ozaki

Ouka Sarano

You call That Service?

2

KISETSU MORITA
Illustration by
HIROKI OZAKI

YEN ON
New York

Copyright

You Call That Service?, Vol. 2
Kisetsu Morita

Translation by Jasmine Bernhardt
Cover art by Hiroki Ozaki

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

OMAE NO GOHOSHI WA SONO TEIDOKA? volume 2
Copyright © 2011 Kisetsu Morita
Illustrations copyright © 2011 Hiroki Ozaki
All rights reserved.
Original Japanese edition published in 2011 by SB Creative Corp.

This English edition is published by arrangement with SB Creative Corp., Tokyo in care of Tuttle-Mori Agency, Inc., Tokyo.

English translation © 2020 by Yen Press, LLC

Yen Press, LLC supports the right to free expression and the value of copyright. The purpose of copyright is to encourage writers and artists to produce the creative works that enrich our culture.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like permission to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact the publisher. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Yen On
150 West 30th Street, 19th Floor
New York, NY 10001

Visit us at yenpress.com
facebook.com/yenpress
twitter.com/yenpress
yenpress.tumblr.com
instagram.com/yenpress

First Yen On Edition: March 2020

Yen On is an imprint of Yen Press, LLC.
The Yen On name and logo are trademarks of Yen Press, LLC.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Morita, Kisetsu, author. | Ozaki, Hiroki, illustrator. | Bernhardt, Jasmine, translator.
Title: You call that service? / Kisetsu Morita ; illustration by Hiroki Ozaki ; translation by Jasmine Bernhardt ; cover art by Hiroki Ozaki.
Other titles: Omae no gohoshi wa sono teidoka?. English
Description: First Yen On edition. | New York, NY : Yen On, 2019–
Identifiers: LCCN 2019036814 | ISBN 9781975305628 (v. 1 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975305642 (v. 2 ; trade paperback)
Subjects: CYAC: Vampires—Fiction. | Love—Fiction. | Humorous stories.
Classification: LCC PZ7.1.M6725 Yo 2019 | DDC [Fic]—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2019036814

ISBNs: 978-1-9753-0564-2 (paperback)
978-1-9753-0565-9 (ebook)

E3-20200226-JV-NF-ORI

Contents

Cover

Insert

Title Page

Copyright

Prologue

Episode 1: LET'S LEAD A HIGH SCHOOL LIFE WITH ENEMIES ON ALL SIDES!

Episode 2: LET'S ESCAPE THIS ENEMY-RIDDLED HIGH SCHOOL LIFE!

Episode 3: LET'S CURSE BIG SIS!

Episode 4: LET'S HAVE A TOUR OF THE ROYAL CASTLE!

Episode 5: LET'S CHAT WITH REI FOR THE FIRST TIME IN FOREVER!

Episode 6: LET'S SAVE BIG SIS!

Epilogue

Afterword

Yen Newsletter

You call That Service?

©Hiroki Ozaki

Characters

Ryouta ~~Asagiri~~ Fuyukura

A second-year high school student who wandered into the Sacred Blood Empire. He is cursed to be extremely attractive to human females. He became Shiren's minion and now lives with her.

Shiren Fuyukura

There was some distance between Shiren and her older sister, the emperor, because Shiren is the daughter of someone suspected of assassinating the previous emperor, but they recently made up. Ryouta's master.

Ouka Sarano

The current emperor, who claimed independence from Japan for the Sacred Blood Empire. Shiren's older sister. An old friend of Ryouta's from elementary school.

©Hiroki Ozaki

PROLOGUE

©Hiroki Ozaki

PROLOGUE

Hom.

Now, what could this noise be?

It didn't sound like *om*, similar to the pronunciation of the French word *homme*, by the way.

It wasn't pronounced *houm* like the English word *home*, either.

This meant it wasn't French or English.

The answer was that it was Shiren biting into Ryouta. *Hom*, as it were.

"Yeeeeeoooooooowwwww!"

Three seconds later, Ryouta leaped from his bed.

The more she bit him, the more his cries evolved into sounds humans would have trouble imitating.

"Come on! Stop biting me! You're leaving marks!" Ryouta snapped, but naturally, his assailant found no fault with what she was doing.

The one sinking her fangs into Ryouta Fuyukura's neck was a lovely girl with blond pigtails who was considerably shorter than he was.

Her name was Shiren Fuyukura.

With no other context, she looked like Ryouta's little sister, but their relationship wasn't that simple.

"No, I'm going to bite you. I'm going to bite you a *lot*, in fact. You are a minion, and you are not to wake up any later than your master."

Indeed—Ryouta was the minion of a Sacred Blooded girl named Shiren Fuyukura. To be precise, he was a minion by force. Due to their master-servant relationship, his last name was now officially Fuyukura. Well, it wasn't technically "official," since it wasn't recognized by Japanese law, but it was as official as could be in the Sacred Blood Empire.

©Hiroki Ozaki

“It’s six thirty right now. When did you wake up?”

“Six fifteen and thirty-seven seconds.”

“Just sleep in till seven. We’ll still be on time for school!”

She was clearly getting up early to bite him.

“But you won’t let me bite you if I don’t get up earlier than you.”

That was a rule in the Fuyukura household, one Shiren had made up on her own without consulting him.

Adult Sacred Blooded people had the power to make humans follow their orders by biting them. But since Shiren was not yet mature, she didn’t seem to have that power, and so Ryouta was still a normal Japanese person.

In spite of this, she leaped at every opportunity she got to bite him, ready to seize the moment he would finally be her minion.

By the way, this wasn’t a punishment. For that, she had more effective methods, like poking him in the eyes. (Don’t try this at home, kids.)

“Okay, but I’m awake now, so no more biting.”

“No need to be so stiff. I’ll only have a little.”

“The answer is no.”

“C’mon! Lemme have a li’l nibble! ☆”

You could almost hear the crickets.

“You really left shame at the door for that one, huh…?”

It was awkward any way you sliced it.

Shiren’s face flushed bright crimson. Before long, it would match the color of her uniform. “Stop! It hurts even more when you’re so blunt about it!”

“Now that I’m awake, I’m not letting you have any. That’s the rule.”

“I thought you’d say that.” Shiren took three steps away from Ryouta.

“What, are you finally giving up?”

“No, quite the opposite. I’m going to make you my full-fledged minion once and for all! Hop, skip, and jump!”

With a brief running start, she leaped at him with utter determination. Her pigtails formed a brilliant arc in the air.

And since she came at him face-first, he couldn’t block with his arms. She was probably okay with biting him there anyway.

It was an unblockable secret technique!

“How’s this?! You can’t stop me this time!”

“That’s low!”

“Now serve me!”

And in retaliation, Ryouta…stepped to the side.

“Ah—”

With that, Shiren became lodged in the bed.

She wasn’t a sword, of course, but with her face stuck in the blanket and her body straight as an arrow, she was somehow pulling off a hands-free headstand.

“I’m impressed that you can keep your balance in that position.”

After his color commentary, Ryouta “plucked” Shiren from the bed, like pulling a sword from a stone.

She easily fell into his arms, bridal-style. He had finally gotten used to this routine, so carrying her this way no longer made him blush.

“It’s my loss today. I’m going to go back to sleep for a bit, so take me to my bed.”

“You need to live a more independent lifestyle. Also, don’t go back to sleep.”

“Who cares? I am your master, and you will obey *me*!”

“Yes, yes, understood, Master.”

With a defeated sigh, Ryouta delivered Shiren to her bed.

When he was done packing lunch, Ryouta started preparing breakfast.

Most of it was leftovers from dinner the night before, which was primarily traditional Japanese food. That’s because Shiren insisted on it. Cooking was one of Ryouta’s few hobbies, so getting everything ready really wasn’t all that bad.

“Mm. It smells like miso soup. Good morning, Ryouta. Thank you for breakfast again today.” Shiren came down from the second floor.

“You really do appear when you smell food.”

“Silence. I shall now gracefully read the newspaper.”

With a cup of piping hot tea in one hand, Shiren perused the paper (and she had poured the tea herself, of course).

The Fuyukura household had the *First National Sacred Blood* newspaper delivered. It was apparently the best-selling newspaper in the whole Empire.

From what Ryouta could see, she was skipping straight to the comics.

“Hmm. *You’re Rouko, I’m Kouko!* is attacking the crazies again today. Author Kin Hayashimori gets it. I like how its ideology is consistent with the newspaper, how he’s ready to outpace his readers.”

“Newspapers are mostly for people middle-aged and older… It doesn’t fit you at all.”

You’re Rouko, I’m Kouko! was a short, four-panel comic strip about main character Kouko (a second-year middle schooler and natural-born leader whose name is written with the same characters as Confucius) and her friend Rouko (another second-year middle schooler and silent type whose name is written with the same characters as Laozi) bickering and fighting over philosophy. It was authored by Kin Hayashimori.

“Either way, I wasn’t really sold on Rouko being a good girl’s name, but I’m used to it now. That’s the scary part.”

“If it’s interesting, I have no complaints.”

“But I’ve been a bit worried about the increased frequency of Sonko [second-year junior high schooler and the loud one, whose name is written with the same characters as Sun Tzu] moving the story along with those absurd weapons. Sure, you can overcome anything with *the power of science!* and that makes it easy to create stories, but I don’t like how it’s lessening the comic’s original appeal, which was Kouko’s and Rouko’s surreal questions and answers. It’s like a kids’ manga that was originally a romance but turned into an action story partway through. At any rate, the art style really solidified by the fourth volume, so that’s good. But now all the characters seem shorter than they were originally.”

“It’s just a newspaper comic strip! It’s not that deep!”

The full manga for *You’re Rouko, I’m Kouko!* was on sale, published by First National Sacred Blood Newspaper Publishing.

“Let’s see, any other news…? Oh, the price of blood has gone up again. This will make life harder for the common folk. Tobacco, too? Sure, whatever. The price of beef bowls is down. And another two percent raise on the consumption tax? Okay.”

“*Okay?!* That is *not* okay! I didn’t know they were raising taxes! We’re already so tight on money…”

Ryouta dragged his hands down his face at the table.

By the way, this wasn’t a Japanese tax; this was an Imperial tax.

Their address was 3-6 West Garden at the Imperial Palace, Sacred Blood

Empire 1-58211.

This area, originally the city of Akinomiya in the country of Japan, had been taken over by a vampiric people called the Sacred Blooded about six months prior.

The border was normally closed, and no Japanese people should have been able to get through. But the clueless Ryouta had had no way of knowing about the Empire and ended up coming in by climbing the mountain from the neighboring city of Oshiro. It was a good example of how ignorance in an information society could be fatal.

Shiren Fuyukura found him and made him her minion, and the rest is history.

Well, technically, he was only in the awkward position of minion *candidate*.

"It says why they're raising taxes *right* here. The emperor—I mean, Big Sis says, 'I have been suffering discomfort because of the stinkbugs in my room, so my subjects must feel discomfort as well.'"

"Ouka's gonna get herself assassinated…"

The Sacred Blooded Emperor, Ouka Sarano, was Shiren's older sister and Ryouta's first crush from elementary school. And her real name was extremely long: Ouka Elisabeta Alexandra Florentina Sylvia Rosanna Sarano. It was probably a pain to write on her tests.

"There's a comment here, too: *By the way, I heard that stinkbugs are tasty—supposedly, they taste like cilantro. Why don't you try one? Just eat a stinkbug if you're out of bread. I, on the other hand, hate cilantro, so I won't be having any*."

"Is she asking for a violent uprising and a trip to the guillotine?!"

"*But the country is doing its very best to reduce unnecessary spending. We closed the tax complaint telephone line yesterday, for example.*"

"She has no intention of listening to anyone's complaints!"

"*These are trying times, but I believe that my people can overcome them.*"

"The conclusion sounds nice, but it's not convincing!"

Well, it did sound like Ouka.

"Don't shout too loudly. Big Sis'll hear you. It's embarrassing enough to be heard outside. The walls in this house are pretty thin."

"Right, we're on the castle grounds. But we don't get any of the perks of

living here.”

Ryouta and Shiren’s house was a new installation to the castle garden that felt like it had been built over forty years ago. That sounds weird, but it’s true. The old-fashioned air of the place made it hard to believe it was new.

Shiren had been officially recognized as Ouka’s little sister and allowed to live on castle grounds, but she didn’t take the Imperial last name of Sarano. She was still Shiren Fuyukura. Ryouta had never asked for the reason, but it was likely that she was fond of the name after using it for so long.

But there was no harm in asking, was there?

“Hey, I was just wondering. Why don’t you use the last name Sarano? Ouka even gave you permission.”

“It’s too annoying to write.”

“Sorry. I was an idiot for expecting a serious reason.”

There was nothing wrong with wanting things easy, but he would have preferred if she were more aware of her position as the emperor’s younger sister.

“*Sigh*… I didn’t want to live in this run-down place. I was thinking more of a dreamlike castle… I want to lounge on a fluffy sofa or a fluffy bed, with a one-hundred-inch TV, and burn wads of money for lighting, and have my servants warm my shoes in their shirts, and drink sake from the skulls of military generals who I killed myself, and call myself the Demon Lord of the Sixth Heaven. You know.”

“Who are you, Nobunaga Oda?!”

Shiren moodily shoveled rice into her mouth.

As far as Ryouta was concerned, if she was fine with a simple bowl of rice, she would never acclimate to castle life.

“Then why don’t you ask? She’s your sister, right? You could at least—”

“I can’t.”

“That was fast. What’s your proof?”

“I think Big Sis hates me.”

Shiren spoke, cradling her head in her hands. Her pigtails swayed

slightly. This was the reaction of one who believed she was out of options.

"What? No way. You just made that up, didn't you? If she still hates you, then you really messed up. Can you think of any reason why she would?"

"I put a paper cup in the plastic bottle recycling box in the garden."

"Then sort your trash better?"

Shiren could stand to live a greener lifestyle.

"I was on the bus, but I didn't have any small change, so it took a long time when I got off. I only had a five-thousand-yen note."

"Always have small change on you, or you'll bother the other passengers."

Once she started listing them out, they were just mundane annoyances.

"I didn't eat any of the parsley in my lunch from the convenience store."

"That's not a crime. You really remember every detail, don't you?!"

"Oh, and I borrowed a comic from her and kept it for two weeks, even though I said I'd give it back after one."

"These are all minor offenses!"

"Nrgh, Big Sis always remembers the little things… She says she knows pi to the eleventh digit."

"I…don't know if you can brag about knowledge like that, but regardless! It really doesn't sound like you've done anything to make her hate you. I think you've got the wrong idea." He wouldn't want Ouka as the emperor if she would get mad over tiny things like that. "Are you sure there isn't actually something you—?"

Shiren glanced briefly at Ryouta, and there was something about that little motion that caught his attention. She seemed to want to tell him something but was afraid to.

"Wait, Shiren, don't tell me—"

"You understand? My minion is so sharp." Her gaze turned affectionate.

"……Are you gonna bite me again? Sorry, the blood bank is closed today! I'm pretty sure you don't understand, since you've never been bitten, but it hurts, okay?!"

"No! You dolt!" Shiren said and jabbed him in the eyes.

"Gah! I can't see! The world's gone daaark!"

Ryouta rolled around on the ground, hysterical.

This action-packed scene was business as usual for their meals together.

“Ryouta, aren’t your grades in Japanese kind of bad? The teacher said you lack reading comprehension.”

“No, that’s not true… But wait, why are you so angry with me…?”

“It’s a minion’s duty to consider his master’s feelings!”

“Fine, I get it. I’ll buy as many of your favorite tomatoes as you like.”

But Shiren’s expression told him that nothing he could say would help. She looked crestfallen. “…After school, I’m going to poke you in the eyes all I want.”

“Then don’t look so miserable about it!”

And so the time to go to school was creeping ever so slowly toward them.

“*Sigh*, I don’t wanna go to school.” When he thought about the hours of endless anxiety, Ryouta could feel his energy draining away.

“I don’t want to go, either…”

Shiren also sighed with exhaustion.

To put it briefly, they had a lot of enemies at school.

Characters

Kiyomizu Jouryuuji

Ryouta's classmate from school in Japan, as well as his stalker. She followed him into the Sacred Blood Empire. Assassin for the Virginal Father.

Tamaki Shijou

Classmate of Shiren and Ryouta. She's typically calm and collected, but once she slips into a pessimistic mood, there's no coming back for a while.

Sasara Tatsunami

A personal guard for the emperor, Ouka. She is madly in love with her liege and will often act recklessly because of it.

Alfoncina XIII

The archbishop of the Holy Church of the Sacred Blood. She boasts of her idol-like popularity throughout the Empire. She is an older student at Ryouta's school. Her real name is Matsuko Kimura.

©Hiroki Ozaki

EPISODE 1

LET'S LEAD A HIGH SCHOOL LIFE WITH ENEMIES ON ALL SIDES!

©Hiroki Ozaki

EPISODE 1

LET'S LEAD A HIGH SCHOOL LIFE WITH ENEMIES ON ALL SIDES!

Ryouta had always been afraid of going to school.

It was all because of his curse. His grandfather, who was not a very attractive man, had prayed to make his grandson extremely attractive to every girl he met, and so Ryouta had always been targeted by the opposite sex.

He wasn't happy at all about being so attractive—he had even been kidnapped once.

Living in the Sacred Blood Empire was a huge change for him because the curse had no effect on the Sacred Blooded. He could finally lead a regular school life in this country.

But going to school had become a bit painful for him.

It wasn't like he was bad at studying. If anything, he was pretty good at it.

He wasn't the victim of malicious bullying, either; he was rather a key figure in incorporating Shiren into the class.

It wasn't because of the public shame Shiren enjoyed inflicting on him with the collar and chain he wore around his neck on the way to school. For the Sacred Blooded, regular humans could be made into minions, so there was a risk of being targeted. It was embarrassing, of course, but that wasn't the reason why he didn't want to go to school.

It was because a week ago, a transfer student had joined their class.

Three of them, in fact.

In a normal high school, the arrival of a transfer student might be an exciting, heart-pounding affair, but it was not interesting at all, since everyone knew who they were.

It was a social nightmare.

"Hmm, what is it, Ryouta? You seem kind of down. Is it hemorrhoids?"

“I guess it’s obvious if you can tell, Shiren. I’m fine; it’s not really that serious.”

“But if you ignore the pain, you may later discover that it isn’t hemorrhoids but cancer. You should go to the doctor. I won’t laugh.”

“It’s not hemorrhoids! It’s not that at all!”

“You don’t have to hide it. I won’t laugh; you can count on it! I’m not going to spread word through a chain e-mail or anything!”

“Hey! That’s a weird thing to be confident about! And normal people don’t spread anything through a chain e-mail anyway!”

As they engaged in their usual back-and-forth, they finally arrived at school.

The official name of the school was Public High School No. 1, Established to Nurture the Talent That Will Create Our Noble Future—long and unconvincing. Emperor Ouka had probably come up with it.

“Phew, Public High School No. 1, Established by Us Noble Aliens Who Yet Have No Name sure is far from castle grounds.”

“Could you stop trying to use the entire official name that you obviously can’t remember and just call it High School No. 1 or something?”

“But shortening it like that makes it impossible to distinguish it from Public High School, Wondering What the No. 1 Hit on the Charts Will Be This Week.”

“That name has nothing to do with education!”

“*Sigh*, you are quite enthusiastic this morning. I have low blood pressure today in comparison…”

They came across a familiar girl at the school gates: Tamaki Shijou, who was Ryouta and Shiren’s classmate.

She was a typical Japanese beauty with long black hair, but she was so pessimistic that Ryouta no longer found himself captivated by her looks.

“The weather is lovely today. I am so sorry that you have to see my face first thing in the morning… I will enter through the back tomorrow… Oh, that doesn’t mean I got into school through back channels; I have no connections for such a thing…”

“I don’t remember asking for an apology, so pick your head up, Shijou!”

“Head up, and off with it… Yes, the very fact that I am alive is a sin… I’m sorry; I’m so sorry…”

“Not even Ouka would do something like that!”

“Now that I’ve received your forgiveness, I will be lifting my head, okay…?”

It was trouble enough to get her to look up. But once their eyes met, he got a slightly different reaction.

“Oh…ah…! Ah…” Tamaki was turning bright red.

She covered her face with the book she was holding.

“Um… I know it’s strange to bring this up again after all this time, but… I wanted to take this opportunity to officially apologize…”

“Er, for what?”

“I caused you so much trouble Saturday before last…”

“What happened on Saturday…? Oh, right, the library.”

Ryouta mentally replayed the scene from the library in his mind.

He’d had Tamaki accompany him to do some research in the library, and a little accident led to him pinning her down.

Of course, Ryouta himself didn’t do anything untoward, but it was true that Tamaki had bitten him and made things a little awkward.

“I think that was partially my fault, too…”

“No, it wasn’t, Ryouta. It was all my fault that I got pinned down.”

“Wait, wait, wait! Context! Yes, I technically did pin you to the floor, but—”

“I understand. You are so kind, Ryouta, that you cannot ignore the suffering of others, which is why you pinned me down so quickly. You would never pin down anyone as unappealing as me otherwise.”

…Why was this happening? Every word she spoke was only making things worse.

And Tamaki’s voice carried well. The situation was turning into an ethical nightmare, where she would end up yelling *Pin me down* at the school gates.

“And I gave in to temptation; then I ended up biting you… Even though I knew you are Shiren Fuyukura’s minion (candidate)… I knew it; I am a failure of a Sacred Blooded; I am trash… I hope I can at least be recycled into toilet paper…”

It had been a dangerous situation, for sure. If Shiren hadn’t come along, the possibility of Ryouta ending up as Tamaki’s minion would have been exponentially higher. If that had happened, his life would have changed dramatically. He could have been waking her up every morning with the

same greeting: *Shijou, it's time to eat. You have to have a hearty breakfast because of your low blood pressure*.

○ SCENARIO START ○
"Shijou, it's morning. Wake up."

"Good morning, Ryouta… I'm sorry I am not a morning person… I should just toss myself out the window so I don't cause my minion any more trouble…"

"Don't jump! And we're only on the first floor! You'll just be in the yard!"

"I'm sorry my steps are unsteady. Could you please carry me on your back…?"

"You're the master. But wow, you really do have low blood pressure."

"Thank you. I don't mind if you order me around this time, Ryouta."

"No thanks. That would be weird for several reasons."

"Then I hate to be so authoritarian, but I do have a request…"

"Sure, I don't mind. But what is it?"

"I have such low blood pressure that I require a bit of extra stimulation to jump-start my autonomic nervous system, so…could you give me a wake-up kiss…?"
○ END OF SCENARIO ○

Hang on, something like that wasn't outside the realm of possibility—

But he cut off that little train of thought before it could become more indulgent. Tamaki would never be so bold as to ask for a wake-up kiss.

And by the way, Tamaki had said "gave in to temptation." What did she mean by that?

Why did she want to bite him so much…?

Oh, right, the Sacred Blooded drank human blood. For a second, he had assumed that she had a crush on him. How silly.

"Is something wrong, Ryouta? You looked like you were in a trance or something. Oh, maybe you don't care very much for me, even though I'm right here in front of you… I'm sorry… I have been so impudent…"

"No, wait, that's not what I was thinking at all!"

His thoughts about Tamaki had actually been racier than he cared to

admit, so he felt the need to apologize.

"I should just run the library committee all by my lonesome… I should just read books by myself during break time. It's not like anyone is going to reach out to me anyway…"

"That's not what I'm saying at all! You always look so at peace when you're reading quietly in the classroom; I like it!"

"You…like…the way I look?" Tamaki's eyes widened almost in fright.

Uh-oh. It looked like Ryouta got caught up in the momentum and created yet another misunderstanding.

"I see… You're so kind, R-R-Ryouta, thinking so favorably of someone so pitiful and friendless…"

"Yeah, try not to be so negative, okay…?"

The air of awkwardness persisted.

"O-ow!"

Then he felt a heavy smack on his flank.

Wondering what it was, he looked to find Shiren tugging on the chain attached to the collar around his neck.

"You were talking for far too long. I thought your legs had stopped working!"

She wasn't just pulling on it; she was throwing her full weight against it to pull with every bit of strength in her body.

"Seriously, that hurts! I have my limits, Shiren! I get it, so let go!"

"Liar! That went on too long for someone who gets it! You forget who your master is!"

"I haven't forgotten… But that aside, could you quit pulling on the collar already…?"

"Ryouta, we can talk about everything else in class, okay? Let's just do that. You're okay with that, right, Tamaki?"

"Oh, yes, I'm sorry…"

Tamaki also, of course, agreed.

And so Ryouta was dragged along the rest of the way. He could've resisted if he wanted to, but the collar hurt.

Maybe Son Goku and Monk Sanzo from *Journey to the West* had a relationship like this.

"Ryouta, I don't want to start putting massive restraints on my minions. As long as you fulfill the minimal requirements of your service, I am happy

to give you freedom beyond that. But there are limits to everything."

"What do you mean by 'limits'?"

"I mean, don't have a conversation with a girl from class and use the phrase *pin down* several times in a single minute!"

She pulled on his collar again.

Stop. My consciousness is going dark.

"Be a proper minion; otherwise, I will lose my dignity! Be more serious!"

"That's… Fine. I'll be more careful."

Even Ryouta had no choice but to follow Shiren's lead when it came to these things.

If any weird rumors started popping up because of this, it would impede his school life. It would not be a joke if his life at school was made even more difficult than it already was.

But just as they entered the hallway, he could not follow her anymore.

"Take off the chain. I'll stay in the bathroom until break time is over," Ryouta raised his hand and declared with a pale face.

"Hemorrhoid cream commercials sure are funny, aren't they?"

"Enough with the hemorrhoids, please! Are you a secret agent for a proctologist or something?!"

"But what are you thinking? Hiding in the bathroom for break is a stereotypical escape for a kid who's being bullied. Tell me if there's anyone bullying you. Your master will be there to help you."

"I appreciate it, but you're way off. For now, how about you 'help' me out of this collar?"

He turned his gaze down the hall, where the bathroom was. It wasn't particularly clean or dirty, but it was an oasis for him.

In fact, it was the only place he could get a moment's respite.

"I want some peace and quiet during break, at least…"

Even if it was just for the ten minutes until the bell rang, it would be better than nothing.

He'd felt someone watching him during class lately.

It might be more accurate to say that someone was monitoring him, given how uneasy it made him.

This was no delusion.

After all, Ouka was sitting right next to him, fixing him with an intense stare at that very moment. She had even turned her desk a full ninety degrees to face in his direction so that Ryouta was now always in her line of sight.

"Hey, Ouka, don't you think this is a little weird?"

"Not at all. Today is another lucky day in the Empire, and everything is operating normally. My stocks haven't fallen dramatically or anything of the sort."

"Right… Let's take a look at the smaller picture. There might be someone in trouble right before your very eyes. Acts of kindness are often born from noticing the most minute details."

"My greatest act of kindness is being emperor, and I perform my role for the benefit of the entire world. Your ears are filthy, by the way. Are you washing them properly?"

"Why are you scrutinizing me so closely? This is weird!"

And with that, her desk was now docked right up against Ryouta's desk and still rotated to face him. He wouldn't have to reach that far to touch her. But he didn't think there was much to be gained by touching other students during class even if he did make an attempt.

This had to count as a classroom distraction.

"It's fine. It's no big deal."

"You sound like a boy peeking in the girls' bath."

"You say that, but I bet all this attention is actually getting you excited, isn't it? *Hff, hff, she's looking at my dirty ear, hff, hff…* Right? You should be thankful that I'm participating in your base fantasies."

"Don't spread rumors when you don't even have anything to base them on! It's messed up!"

"A rumor it may be, but its roots run deep. A large flower blooms, scattering seeds far and wide. They sprout into a massive forest, becoming the foundation of my Imperial might!"

"Stop glorifying the fact that you spread rumors!"

No matter how he looked at it, she was harassing him.

If this was something he'd only recently learned about her, he could have easily considered it bullying, but Ryouta and Ouka's relationship wasn't so cut-and-dried.

Long ago, during the revolution that took place when the two of them were in elementary school, Ryouta was Ouka's classmate. Now that he thought back on it, they had been pretty close.

She was also Ryouta's first crush.

Ever since she was little, Ouka had had the fierce beauty of a royal flower—just as the literal meaning of her name suggested.

She had bright, fiery red hair; an expression full of confidence and elegance; and a slightly delicate stature.

And most importantly, since she was Sacred Blooded, she was free from the curse on Ryouta that made all the human girls unilaterally fall in love with him, so she could chat with him freely.

Given all that, he knew that crushing on her was wholly unreasonable. But it was even more unreasonable to think that he could sit there calmly when his first crush was right next to him.

"Honestly, I already know everything at this grade level. It's far more beneficial for me to observe you—the only Japanese person here in this country—and your way of life. You know, for fun."

"Hey, I— Oof, *brrr*."

Just as he was about to retort, he felt the icy chill of pure malice coming from behind him. Or perhaps just murderous fury, rather than malice.

"If you don't wish to find a sword in your eyes or throat, I would suggest *not* talking back to Lady Ouka."

He turned around, and there was Sasara. She was glaring at him as if she had always been there.

Sasara Tatsunami was one of Ouka's personal Imperial Guards.

In terms of status, the Imperial Guards were Ouka's minions, but they were considered to be of the noble class, and Sasara certainly did look the part. Even her school uniform looked like a one-of-a-kind dress.

Sasara's job was to protect the emperor, but some of the girls apparently called her "Prince." She had the heart of a warrior rarely seen in most girls.

If that were the only truth, he would have been fine. However… "Fine… If it means I won't get cut in half, I'll try to be friendlier with her."

"What?! *Be friendly* with Lady Ouka?! You think too highly of yourself! I'll gladly cut you down to size!"

"Okay, then I won't."

"That would be the same as treason against the emperor. I'll slice you in

half.”

“Wait…so you decided you’re going to cut me in half anyway?”

Regardless, she was fully intent on killing him. She was a whole different kind of trouble from Ouka.

“No need to worry. We’ll have a lovely headstone prepared for you.”

“Can you please put that effort into prolonging my life?!”

“To think you would be this close to my Lady Ouka… I cannot accept this I cannot accept this I cannot accept this please let me install a secret camera under your desk in a spot where I can see up Lady Ouka’s skirt.”

“What on Earth are you talking about…?”

In a word, Sasara was a lesbian.

Truthfully, Ryouta wasn’t sure if Sasara simply preferred women or if her feelings for Ouka transcended sexual preference entirely.

Her devotion to Ouka went above and beyond, and it had reached the territory of love.

And the number of her handmade Ouka plushies had apparently reached triple digits not too long ago. One of them hung from her belt, and she was never without it.

Normally, this wouldn’t have any impact on Ryouta, but as Ouka closed the distance between them, he was being turned into a hypothetical enemy.

“Regardless, please step away from Lady Ouka. At least farther away than I am from her.”

“I’m telling you, it’s Ouka who’s getting closer to me. I’m already in my spot!”

“This is my answer to that.”

Sasara placed her Ouka plushie on the desk and squeezed its body.

“Silence! I am the law! You will never be in a position to talk back to me!”

It would play back a recording of Ouka’s voice when squeezed. It was quality workmanship.

“Say it yourself! You don’t have to pull out your stuffed doll!”

“I thought it was perfect. It allows me to hear stuffed Lady Ouka’s voice even during class.”

“Sasara, you’re leaning too far forward. Sit back. You’re being absurd,” Ouka said.

“*You’re* the one with your desk facing the wrong way!” Ryouta retorted.

Since Sasara had pushed so far forward, Ryouta could barely move his chair back.

"What's this? We have someone here with her desk rotated one hundred and eighty degrees. Don't you think it's weird that you're complaining about me and my ninety-degree angle? Or is Jouryuuji special?"

Oh no. He had stepped on a land mine.

"Yes, she is!"

A voice came from the seat in front of Ryouta.

And it came from straight in front of him.

He looked forward, and there was a girl who looked no older than an elementary school student with her desk turned completely backward.

This was Kiyomizu Jouryuuji.

You might be wondering how an elementary school student found her way in here, but no, she belonged in high school.

Ryouta had a checkered past with Kiyomizu that he did not care to remember, but to put it extremely simply, Kiyomizu was a member of an assassin's group called the Virginal Father whose purpose was to exterminate the Sacred Blooded, so she had snuck into the Empire but ultimately failed. Unable to return to Japan, she shamelessly enrolled in a Sacred Blooded high school.

In short, she was so passionately in love with Ryouta that she had just about lost her mind.

"The red thread of fate links me to Ryouta! Of course I'm special! As special as a chocolate ball with a golden angel inside."

"That's a weird way to put it. Wait, huh? Something's squeezing my arm."

Some sort of red string had been wrapped around his arm.

It wasn't so much a string; it was thick enough to be more of a rope.

Kiyomizu must have wrapped it around him again. Such things were child's play for her, since she was an assassin.

Having an assassin for a classmate was too much for him to deal with, so he decided to ignore it.

But the string seemed somewhat elastic; in fact, it didn't feel like string at all.

The very front of the string stuck out its tongue with a *hiss*.

It was a snake.

“Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhh! Snaaaaaaaaaaake!”

“Oh, this is a bloodred corn snake. I think these normally live in America,” Ouka explained lightly. Of course, Ryouta couldn’t remain as calm as her.

“Oh, I don’t think it’s venomous or anything. Where did you get this anyway, Jouryuuji?”

“When I told Virginal Father HQ that I would be using it for work, they wrote it off as a business expense. They have way too much money.”

What was up with that cult’s finances?

In the end, after a brief struggle, Ryouta was free from the creature’s grasp.

“That’s an interesting snake. I want one; let me have it.”

“It was paid for by the company, so I don’t mind. Take it, thief.”

“Could you maybe help me out before you complete that transaction?!”

“I haaate reptiles,” Ouka said in a monotone.

“Yeah, right! Then don’t try and take it for yourself!”

“It’s true. I don’t really like snake soup.”

“You’re talking about food now?!”

Sure, people eat snakes in some regions, but that’s neither here nor there.

*The snake was safely returned to Kiyomizu, by the way.

“Guys, you are way too rowdy. I don’t care what you do during break time, but please at least take class seriously. This is embarrassing.”

He was, of course, more than willing to hide in the bathroom during break time.

“Well, I suppose I understand that you wouldn’t want to take a class like this. That kid got full marks on her transfer exam, minus the essay portion.”

“It was easy with my brains.”

“Wait, since when were you the studious type, Kiyomizu?”

“It was also very easy to steal the answers when there was basically no surveillance.”

“Did you say something?”

He could have sworn he heard her say something highly unethical.

“Oh, I didn’t say anything. On the name of Amitabha and Bodhisattva and Acala, I swear I didn’t say anything.”

“Please don’t incur divine wrath…”

“I have two hundred and sixteen carnal desires.”

“That’s more than twice the average person!”

“Two hundred and thirteen of those are related to you, Ryouta, my dearest. Oh, if you were not part of this world, then I would have led the life of a saint. It’s all because of you that I have been sullied so.”

To be honest, it was extremely troubling that she could say something like that with a straight face in class.

“But I just can’t understand why my essay didn’t get full points. I had every intention of getting a perfect score on that test.”

Kiyomizu was still unhappy that the essay portion had ruined her perfect grade.

That probably showed how seriously she had taken the test.

“What part of my love deserves a deduction like that?!”

“Hold on a second. What kind of essay did you write?”

His instincts sensed danger.

Kiyomizu was always putting him in danger, so he was pretty sensitive to it.

“This is the essay. I was rather proud of it, so I had them return it to me.”

Essay Question

How can we make the world a better place for the future? Please explain in detail.

My family runs a temple. I believe that the ideologies of Buddhism can explain much about the present, as well as the advancement of globalization and the reason we can no longer ignore the natural environment.

In Buddhism, we use a word called engi. *This word reflects our belief that all things have a common origin and that nothing has a determined form. By following this philosophy, we can understand that we live by the connection we have with the rest of the world. It is also possible to do away with avarice and to begin living for the sake of others and for the preservation of the environment.*

“Haven’t you had enough of that boring topic?” The illustrious Ryouta gently pressed his index finger to Kiyomizu’s lips.

“R-Ryouta?”

"I don't care that everything in the world is connected. I only want to be connected with you, Kiyomizu."

Ryouta dearest pulled Kiyomizu in and kissed her passionately until the world around her fell away.

Had she ever felt her heart beating so hard and so loud before?

"I'll do everything I can to make you feel the best you've ever felt."

His hand then hovered beneath her skirt and

When he got to that part, he ripped it up.

"No! My essay of love!"

"Sorry. It was a reflex."

His logic agreed.

"If you're gonna write erotic fiction, then don't use my name without permission! I'm gonna sue you one day!"

There was still a lot of writing left on the paper; what happened after that? Just thinking about it frightened him. No, he couldn't dwell on it.

"Anyway, you seriously—"

Tap, tap. Someone was poking him on the shoulder.

It was coming from the side of him that was opposite Ouka.

He would be in a world of hurt if he turned around. He had been in this country for just over two weeks, which was long enough for him to learn. But if he ignored this person, he would be in even more pain later.

It was basically like a cavity. Going to the dentist is no fun, but if he left the cavity alone, he would suffer even greater pain in the long run. This was something he just had to endure. *Grin and bear it, Ryouta.*

Sometimes, there is no victory without sacrifice. He turned around…

…and got poked in the eyes.

"……"

He would only annoy his classmates if he screamed, but he would have appreciated a compliment on his strength of endurance.

The one who poked him in the eyes was Shiren, by the way.

"Well, you've finally learned how to resist it. Well done, minion of mine."

"Why are you surprised…? This hurts like hell… What am I guilty of this time…?"

“Ryouta, surely you already know why I want you to faint in agony, don’t you?” Shiren sounded genuinely angry. “I think you already know this, but I’m going to say it anyway. Be quiet during class!”

Finally, an appropriate reaction.

“Sorry.”

Even though he thought that the transfer students were at fault here, Ryouta still had it in him to bow his head.

He could blame the new students all he wanted, but it wasn’t like he was ignoring them anyway; a fault was a fault.

“That’s right—we’re in the middle of class… I almost forgot…”

If someone had said *I can’t concentrate* or *I can’t hear the teacher*, he would have apologized, of course. Shiren still hadn’t calmed down from her fit of anger; her pigtails looked like they were going to stand straight up.

“Sorry. Things got so crazy that I just couldn’t—”

“Be quiet! You’re so loud that I can’t sleep!”

Her complaint echoed into the neighboring classroom.

“Lemme teach you guys a saying: *Don’t throw a punch with your hand in the cookie jar*.”

“I thought we were lucky that we finally had world history. Normally, it’s a class I can take a nice nap in, but you’ve been making so much noise that I just can’t get any shut-eye.”

For his master’s sake, he wanted to pinch her cheek as hard as he could. Wait, sorry, he wouldn’t pretend to do it for her sake. He just wanted to pinch her and remind her not to underestimate the world and society.

“And it’s not just him this time, Big Sis. What’s up with your desk?! Face forward!”

“Ummm, but the teacher hasn’t, like, said anything to me, though?” Ouka said, sounding like an airheaded Valley girl.

“Hey, listen to your little sister.”

“I’m obviously fully aware that I’m not supposed to be noisy. But you could also interpret the teacher’s silence as common sense. So if the teacher warns me, I’ll fix my desk. Isn’t that right, Ms. Takasegawa, world history expert?”

The dark smile in her eyes was like a knife directed at the teacher.

Yuko Takasegawa (twenty-eight, single, Sacred Blooded, specializing in world history. She had been a teacher at a high school in Tokyo until last year. She had been dating a man a year older than her with the belief that they would get married, but when the Empire was established, she dumped him right away to teach kids in the new country and came here. But she still hasn't found anyone new and she's starting to panic. Won't someone invite her to a mixer or something?) looked like she was about to cry.

That's because she was up against…

"Oh, don't worry about my status as the emperor, okay? Just pretend you're in a position to scold a student as a teacher. Forget that I'm the most important person in this country and that I have total control over the high school's human rights. Look, you think I'm going to say something awful like, *I'm raising taxes by two percent because the teacher pissed me off*? Isn't that right, the most common of common of commoners, Ms. Takasegawa?"

"Y-Your Impe— I mean, Sarano… What do you…?"

"Go ahead. Tell me what's on your mind."

"You see, Sarano, as an educator…"

"Should I hold a mixer for you to attend, Ms. Takasegawa?"

"Fuyukura, no sleeping in class."

"The teacher's giving in to her power!"

Sure, she wasn't supposed to be sleeping, either, but that wasn't the point.

"Honestly, I don't think the direction of my desk is that much of an issue. As long as I fully grasp the lessons, and as long as I'm not causing problems for other students, I think it's fine. By the way, I've heard that the more hot-blooded teachers are retiring because of heart problems, so you should be careful."

Ms. Takasegawa had tears in her eyes and one foot in the pit of despair.

Ryouta felt strongly that class wasn't very productive with the emperor present.

"So there's no problem here. Okay?"

Ouka flashed a victorious look at Shiren. And since she always looked victorious anyway, this time it was especially so.

"Grrrr. The emperor really shouldn't act this way…"

“Say what you want. I’ve already braced myself to be hated, stabbed, and killed.”

“I think that’s too much. And will you stop doing things that will make people hate you?! Start thinking about your subjects!”

Ryouta wasn’t sure how much of that was a joke, so his interjection was a little strong, almost scolding.

“What…? I wasn’t expecting Ryouta to…yell at me…”

It was boringly effective, and Ouka started swirling her finger on her desk.

“Wait, I didn’t want to make you that upset about it…”

“I’m the emperor, so no one’s ever really scolded me…”

It seemed that even if she was fine with the snarky comments, she wasn’t used to being admonished.

“I hope you’ll learn from this and try to do better, Big Sis.” Shiren started getting in on the action; she must have finally cheered up.

“You were trying to sleep. You have no right to act so high and mighty.”

He probably imagined it, but he thought he saw Ouka’s eyes glint with a *flash*. ☆

It was like she had come up with a good idea.

“I mean, what can I do, Ryouta? I understand how Shiren feels.”

“How does she feel?”

“You know. When her own minion started talking with other female students, she probably felt jealous.”

Heh-heh-heh.

Ryouta could almost hear the sinister snicker behind Ouka’s eyes as she turned to glare at Shiren.

Shiren’s face was a faint shade of red.

Her expression also changed to one that read, *She got me…*

“Th-th-th-th-thth-thththththththat’s not true.”

“You’re really reeling from that, aren’t you? Even I didn’t think you’d have such an obvious reaction as this.”

“I—I—I—I—I—I—I, I—I—I—I would never think something so narrow-minded. Our relationship is nothing more than that of master and minion aaaaaaaa-aaaanywaaaaaay, s-s-s-s-s-s-so why would I ever be…?”

“I’ve never heard anyone say ‘anyway’ like that before.”

Without Ouka’s interjection, Ryouta would not have understood what

she was saying at all.

"Well, then I guess it was just my **imagination**. I must have been **imagining** that you were jealous."

"Yes, you were imagining it…"

When Ryouta watched the two of them interact, he had a thought.

When Shiren said Ouka hated her, maybe this was what she was talking about. It was fair to say Ouka was messing with her.

There wasn't any real malice behind it (or so he wanted to believe), but with Shiren's simple personality and Ouka's god complex, this was how things were turning out.

"Well, now that I have the teacher's permission, I'm going to remain facing Ryouta."

Her logic was rather crude, but it seemed that Ouka's desk had been given the okay.

"Grrrrrrrr, dammit, Big Sis…"

For about fifteen whole seconds, Shiren growled like she was having an especially bad stomachache.

"Fine, then I have an idea!"

She deliberately turned her desk ninety degrees and docked it right up against Ryouta's desk.

If we had to illustrate it, the arrangement would look something like this.

【 TEACHER'S DESK 】

Kiyomizu
↓
Ouka → Ryouta ← Shiren
↑
Sasara **Tamaki**

"Well, I guess I have no choice…but to allow it."

Ouka seemed to give in to a compromise, then nodded with a vexed look.

"Wait, what exactly do you have no choice but to allow…?"

“Impressive, little sister of mine. You put up a fight despite your rotting values.”

“Don’t force it into a compliment of yourself! And don’t let your little sister rot!”

“I may be rotten,” Shiren retorted, “but I’ll do what I can when the time calls for it.” Being rather dense, she was completely unfazed by the insult.

“I honestly can’t believe this arrangement.”

He could believe that he was surrounded by women, but wasn’t turning their desks toward him a little much?

When he faced forward, Kiyomizu’s eyes sparkled and she exclaimed, “Ryouta’s and my gazes intertwined, Ryouta’s and my gazes intertwined, Ryouta and I intertwined, Ryouta and I intertwined…!”

“Don’t casually leave out *gaze*!”

Ryouta was getting annoyed, so he thought about turning his gaze to the side. Left or right, it didn’t matter.

As a test, he looked left.

“Don’t stare at me like that. I’ll take your money.”

To the right.

“…Zzz…”

Shiren was fast asleep.

“No way! You’re already asleep, Shiren?! You were just moving your desk and talking to Ouka a minute ago!”

“Zzz… Ryouta, don’t stick your finger near the snapping turtle; it might bite you…”

“What are you dreaming about?!”

He tried looking behind him.

“We’re in class. Take it seriously and face forward. I will not allow delinquency.” Sasara said something unusually sensible to him. She then squeezed her Ouka plushie.

“Silence! I am the law! You will never be in a position to talk back to me!”

“You made your own words irrelevant with your doll!”

“I cannot calm my nerves unless I hear her voice at least fifty times a day.”

“What are you, a chain smoker?”

The doll presented no harm to her physical health, but it was probably

too late for her emotional health.

"Either way, we are students while we are in this room. It is our role to work our hardest on our studies, so: ***Silence! I am the law! You will never be in a position to talk back to me!***"

"Don't squeeze it while you're talking! I can't hear you!"

A new farce was building, but he couldn't care less.

Ryouta muttered what his heart was thinking. "Enemies on all sides…"

Oh, so this *is what that expression was referring to.*

"Enami Analsai? Who's that supposed to be? I won't let her off easy." Ouka immediately took the bait.

"Don't tell me you're personifying it!"

"Enami, Enami Analsai, fourteen, second-year junior high schooler. Her harsh words and harsher exterior have earned her the resentment of many, but deep down, she has a massive soft spot for her brother."

"Don't give her a backstory. And that's not what *enemies on all sides* means!"

"This is *You're Rouko, I'm Kouko!* in a nutshell."

"You read it, too, Ouka…?"

"Kin Hayashimori is one of the top ten comedy manga artists in the whole Empire."

"That point of reference doesn't really do anything for me…"

How many comedy manga artists did this tiny empire even have?

The bell rang.

It felt like first period had dragged on forever.

Once it was break time, Ryouta went straight to the bathroom.

He didn't need to use it, but he sat on one of the toilets. Girls wouldn't come in here, of course. Kiyomizu might force her way in, though.

His days had been full of this nonsense for a little while now.

And if he was being honest with himself, he would say they were getting worse.

"It's not really that different from when I was in Japan now…"

Ryouta heaved his fifth sigh of the day as he sat on the toilet.

He had been tormented in Japan because of his curse that made him overly attractive to girls, which was nice in only one way. It wouldn't have

been a problem if he was solely attractive to the girls who he liked, but he had nearly been kidnapped and thrown into danger more than a few times.

War had almost broken out between the girls' kendo club and the girls' archery club once.

In the beginning, he thought he would be fine living in the Empire. He would have a carefree life among the Sacred Blooded, who were unaffected by the curse of attraction. At least, that was the hope.

"Why? It's becoming the same as when I lived in Japan… And they're even more dangerous than back then…"

The only relief was that the people he had problems with were still few enough to count…

"One minute left. I wish I could stay for seven more, though."

He had to take rests during breaks when he could; otherwise, his body would seriously fail him.

But just then, he sensed bloodlust again.

He couldn't tell where it was coming from, but there was a chance that the threat was in the bathroom already.

Was it an assassin? Kiyomizu was a member of an organization called the Virginal Father, so he couldn't rule it out. And there were plenty of people with different ideologies within the Empire.

But from what he could tell, the presence wasn't dangerous. The aura felt much softer.

He could hear voices coming from the urinals outside.

"Why is Fuyukura the only one getting all the girls?"

"No matter how you slice it, this morning sucked."

"At this rate, he'll have all the girls under his thumb."

"Then he'll have a harem for real. I can't believe this. Her Majesty is obviously gorgeous, but Tatsunami is definitely top five in our grade. The nerds already made a fan club for Jouryuuji, too. They call themselves Jouryuuji's Guardians or something."

No way! Kiyomizu already has a fan club in this country…?

Kiyomizu would always find popularity with a very narrow range of people.

No, wait, that's not the point… The very thing I was afraid of is happening…

He had his apprehensions, but the boys were actually starting to get

jealous.

If he were in their shoes, he would think, *Why only* him*…?* This was incredibly unfair. And if the trend of jealousy persisted, the other boys would start treating him like a criminal, too, and then he would no longer have any sanctuary.

He would have to clear up this misunderstanding with them before he found himself totally ostracized.

But at this rate, they were headed for a point of no return.

"No, no! We can't be too lenient about this! This is a revolution centered entirely around Ryouta Fuyukura! This is the same as Year Two, Class Three being under a dictatorship by this individual! Do you think the democratic world would allow such a thing? Should we not stand for our own freedom?!"

"We must rise up! We will defeat Ryouta Fuyukura!"

"Yes, we will!"

"Free the class from his tyranny!"

"Freedom for the Sacred Blooded!"

"Bigger allowances!"

"I wanna be popular with the ladies, too!"

Hey, wait! The primary goal of protests and rebellions used to be toppling the regime, not getting girls… Also, we're in an empire… This isn't a democracy…

Unable to leave the bathroom, Ryouta heard the conversation unfold. His curse had made him the target of jealousy quite a few times in the past, but he never thought he'd be called a dictator.

His circle of enemies wasn't going to end with the desks around him. Before long, the whole class would be against him.

"But it's still too early to act. It's not like he's actually done anything bad. We still don't have a reasonable motive. If we do anything now, he'll just think we're a bunch of **jealous, unpopular nerds**."

"Yeah. And we're not **jealous, unpopular nerds**; we're doing this for freedom and for democracy."

Oh good. They're idiots.

"That's why we'll wait and watch. But if he starts making the girls in class cry, we'll have to take up our weapons. Twelve-inch rulers."

That's a pretty flimsy choice for a weapon…

“I’ll use Kotetsu, faithful blade of Isami Kondo of the Shinsengumi!”

“I’ll have the feared spear from Norse mythology, Gungnir!”

“I’ll cut him down with King Arthur’s Excalibur!”

Wait a sec… Why are they claiming all these legendary weapons?! I-I’m gonna die…

“And I shall claim the mighty war hammer! And we will wield our rulers with spirit. In our hearts, our rulers will be Kotetsu and Excalibur and so on.”

Oh good. They’re idiots.

“Men, you are dismissed for today! We shall reconvene next break!”

““Yessir!””

The awkward war council meeting (?) had finally drawn to a close.

It looked like he wouldn’t have to worry about any random attacks from the boys for the time being.

But at this rate, holing up in the bathroom wouldn’t be a viable tactic anymore.

He had to do something.

THE IMPERIAL CASTLE

The legislative, executive, and judicial center of the Sacred Blood Empire. Home of the 107th emperor. A stout, Western-style fortress, built in secrecy several years before the founding of the Empire.

©Hiroki Ozaki

EPISODE 2

LET'S ESCAPE THIS ENEMY-RIDDLED HIGH SCHOOL LIFE!

©Hiroki Ozaki

EPISODE 2

LET'S ESCAPE THIS ENEMY-RIDDLED HIGH SCHOOL LIFE!

"Oh, welcome back from your trip to the bathroom, Ryouta, my dearest!"

When Ryouta got back to the classroom, Kiyomizu gave him a crisp salute.

"Stop, that's embarrassing…"

Rumors that back in Japan, Ryouta Fuyukura had brainwashed a girl who looked like a little kid were starting to spread throughout one part of the class. They were totally baseless. But if the "brainwashing" was actually due to the curse, maybe it was true in a way?

"I was praying for your peace at my desk. You should now be completely safe for the day! As thanks, I would like a kiss—"

"If you want me to have peace, just do nothing. Please live each day as mundanely as possible."

"By the way, Ryouta dearest. Have you forgotten about the promise?"

"What promise?"

He was getting a bad feeling. He had no recollection of ever making a promise to her.

"Remember when I was fighting with your self-proclaimed master? She said, and I quote, 'You may do what you wish with him for a full day, for twenty-four hours. Give him a lifetime's worth of wooing.' Oh, and just before that, your self-proclaimed master also allowed me 'the rights to **** [you] for a whole day.'"

Oh, right, that had happened.

Sasara had challenged Ryouta and Shiren to battle, even joining forces with Kiyomizu, all so she could keep Ouka to herself. Now Ryouta could think back on it and laugh, but he had been a mere inch away from death when it was actually happening. That could have been really bad.

©Hiroki Ozaki

Then, when the battle between Shiren and Kiyomizu reached an impasse, Shiren had made that promise without his permission.

"If possible, I would like to borrow you for a day so that we can do all sorts of wonderful things together, but I thought you might have forgotten. Which is why I asked."

"Oh, no. I definitely remember."

"Great! And now I have that on record."

When did she start recording?

"Sorry, I need to check with my master, so just wait a sec." Ryouta called Shiren over and then dragged her to a corner of the room. "Hey, what are we gonna do about that promise? You're the one who made it, so do something about it!"

Shiren and Ryouta quietly worked out a plan.

"Hmm… I thought it would be like in a manga where she would conveniently lose her memory from the shock of the attack and the situation would neatly resolve itself."

"She remembers every word and phrase. It's like someone copied and pasted the promise right into her brain."

"But what else was I supposed to do…? I had to, or we would've died…" Shiren groaned, cradling her head.

Ryouta knew she'd had no choice.

Shiren had had to put something on the table, even if it was just an empty promise; otherwise, she would have been in danger. But Ryouta was in danger this time.

They ruminated for another twenty-five seconds before Shiren clapped her hands together.

"Okay! I just had a great idea! Hop aboard—everything will be smooth sailing from here on out! I'm not going to point out that that's probably what they said on the *Titanic*, though."

"You just did!"

These comments were the opposite of reassuring.

Shiren turned to face Kiyomizu and waved her arms with confidence. Her pigtails, which were much too long, swayed back and forth.

"Jouryuuji, I did say that you can borrow Ryouta for a day to boil him or fry him or steam him or broil him or dry him or deep-fry him or strain him or freeze him or pickle him or whatever else your heart desires."

“Are you a gourmet now?!”

Ryouta interjected from far away. Pretending like everything was going to go smoothly didn’t mean that everything was going to go *well*, so he was keeping a close eye on what was happening.

It was clear that Shiren was thinking only about eating again.

“Then hand him over, and be quick about it. If you do not, I will take civil action over your inability to pay your debt. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. What’s yours is mine.”

That last part didn’t have anything to do with civil proceedings.

“Well, no need to rush. At this rate, you’ll be operating on a loss. Your potential time of enjoyment will be cut in half.”

“Mm, I cannot ignore that. I would like to know more. Tell me more.”

“In the Rights to Ryouta system, the allotted time doubles every thirty days. So counting the day the rights were administered, if you postpone your claim for another twenty-nine days, then you can have him for two full days!”

“That’s the first I’m hearing of this!”

Obviously, since she’d just made it up on the spot.

“You can accomplish much more in two days than you can in one. Like taking a trip to the hot springs, for example.”

“Ooooh! How exciting!”

It was unclear if there were any hot springs in the Sacred Blood Empire territory, but Ryouta decided to ignore that.

I see. So this is how she plans to wait Kiyomizu out… Hang on. If you think about it, this is really bad for me…

For a second, Ryouta had believed he was out of the woods. But then he noticed a problem.

“Come here a sec. There’s a huge flaw in your plan.” Ryouta pulled Shiren back.

“What do you think? We overcame the problem of the day!”

“Yeah, we made it through *today*— So what happens when the twenty-nine days are up and she claims two full days’ rights over me?”

“……It’s only two days. Hang in there.”

“Thanks for nothing.”

It was abundantly clear that if he spent two days with Kiyomizu, it would devolve into the kind of situation one couldn’t talk about in mixed

company.

“I-indeed, my minion would be sullied. We need to squeeze out a plan. Squeeze, squeeze, squeeeeeeze. Oh, but I hate slimy things, so I’ve never eaten anything that would require any sort of squeezing out.”

“I can’t really tell how serious you are, but please think of something. Seriously.”

“Apparently, if you stir natto three hundred times, the nutrients that make it delicious multiply and the flavor really pops. I don’t eat natto, though.”

“Then stop talking about it.”

But then Kiyomizu pulled Shiren over. “Come here for a moment.”

People were pulling her all over the place.

“Um, I would like to confirm that you said the days double with each month, right?” Kiyomizu’s eyes were glinting like a cat’s in the night.

“Oh yeah, I did. I don’t go back on my word.”

“Which means that, of course, after one month, I’ll have two full days.”

“Yes, of course. That’s easy multiplication.”

“Then after two months, it doubles into four days, correct?”

“Um, it would…yeah.”

“Then after three months, eight days; in four months, sixteen days; in five months, thirty-two days; six months, sixty-four days… I shall write the rest on the blackboard.”

Seven months, 128 days

Eight months, 256 days

Nine months, 512 days

Ten months, 1,024 days

Eleven months, 2,048 days

One year, 4,096 days

“This means that after a year, or in three hundred and sixty-five days, that would come to roughly eleven years’ worth of days. If I wait a year, I could be with my dearest Ryouta for eleven years!!!!!”

““Ahhhhhh!””

Oddly enough, Ryouta’s and Shiren’s reactions were in perfect sync.

“Oh, no, that would be if I used my right all at once. ♪ Once I’ve reached sixty days, I could use a month’s worth of days—those remaining thirty will double and refill the deficit. This means I can use my ‘rights to **** Ryouta for a whole day’ forever. Oh-ho-ho-ho… Oh dear, my nose is bleeding…”

Kiyomizu made triumphant pose after triumphant pose, like a high school baseball player who would be competing at Koshien. She was even hopping in place, so high you might think there was an invisible trampoline at her feet.

It would have been heartwarming if the circumstances hadn’t been what they were, but it was inevitable that it would have a tremendous impact on Ryouta’s life.

“Oh no… This is pretty serious…”

Shiren’s face was white as a sheet, but Kiyomizu was no longer paying her any attention.

“Well then, I’m off to the restroom. Oh, and if you fail to fulfill your promise, I fully intend to destroy you, so be ready. Excuse me.”

Kiyomizu was on cloud nine (she might have actually been floating) as she left the classroom.

“Okay, okay, okay, okay! What’re we gonna do?! My life’s gonna be over soon!”

“Hold on, wait, wait! Calm down! If we think about this backward, as long as we have six months, I’m sure time will solve it for us, right?”

“Time will just end up killing me anyway!”

“Don’t give up. There should be some kind of secret trick like a bases-loaded home run in order to turn this around. Give me thirty seconds!”

…… (Ten seconds passed.)

…… (Then another ten seconds.)

…… (And then another ten seconds.)

“I got nothing.”

“Which is what I expected!”

“The entire staff did everything they could, but it just wasn’t enough.”

“It doesn’t need a neat conclusion like that! We’re just screwed, aren’t we?! Or I am…”

He needed to start doing everything he could to think of a way to save

himself. He had been in huge predicaments before, but this was on another level. All the strength left Ryouta's knees, and he dropped to the floor.

"On your feet."

Someone patted him on the shoulder. He looked up and saw Ouka.

"This is nothing. Solving a problem like this is well within my power as emperor."

"Wh-what are you going to do?"

She always seemed to be scheming, but that was why Ouka probably had a good idea.

"Kill her."

"Isn't there a nonviolent solution?!"

"I've hired the perfect assassin. I'm not sure who's stronger between the two of them, but I do want to pit them against each other at least once. For real."

"It doesn't have to be for real."

He had a hunch that the world would be a more peaceful place if Ouka abdicated.

"But you have an assassin? I guess maybe it's a given when you're a ruler."

"D-don't get the wrong idea! It's not like I hired one because I wanted to!"

"That's not something to act all shy about!"

And from the context, that would mean she'd hired one because she wanted to.

"They just fell into my hands, so I picked them up. Assassins are surprisingly useful, aren't they?"

"You can't treat them like you just picked them up off the street!"

"It's okay. My hands are clean!"

"You sure are gung ho about getting your assassin's hands dirty, then!"

"Silence. I'll cut in the night!"

"What happened to the object in your sentence?!"

After that exchange, Ouka patted Ryouta on the shoulder one more time.

"Well, it'll work out. This'll be smooth sailing."

"I hope so…"

"I won't point out that's probably what they said on the battleship *Yamato*."

“You and Shiren really are related.” They shared traits in the most insignificant ways.

Ouka’s gaze slid from Ryouta to Shiren.

Shiren’s expression was still troubled.

It struck Ryouta that their relationship was like that of a bride and her mother-in-law.

“And I’m wondering if you don’t lose your right to be a master if you can’t manage your own minion. Isn’t it still a little early for you to have a minion at all?”

“N-no, of course not. I know everything about Ryouta, from the top of his toes to the tip of his toenails.”

“That’s not a lot.”

Didn’t the phrase go, *from the top of his head*?

“Then I’m going to quiz you on how well you know Ryouta. Question one. What is his favorite flavor of *Umaibo*?”

It was pretty useless knowledge, but it was probably an essential question.

She would have to be pretty close to him in order to know something like this. And how she brought it up as a question meant…

“Ouka, I can’t believe you remember…”

The two of them had often hung out in elementary school.

When they were buying snacks, she’d once said to him:

“Ryouta, all you ever eat is the corn chowder flavor.”

That was when he realized that he only ever bought one kind.

But who cared? It was the best. He seemed to have an affinity for salty-sweet flavors. His other favorite snacks were Happy Turn and *Yuki no Yado*, two brands of rice crackers that had a pleasant balance between sweet and salty.

Man, I didn’t think she’d remember something like that, though…

One probably could chalk the answer up to Ouka having a remarkable memory, but for Ryouta, having his first crush remember such a minute detail about him was an honor.

Suddenly, their eyes met.

He was probably imagining the look in her eyes that said, *Obviously I’d remember something like this*.

Wait, don’t tell me that Ouka… Wait, wait, this is too convenient.

Right now, it was more important to see how Shiren would respond. She was his master, so he wanted her to be right.

"Hmm… Ummm, *Umaibo*, right? So that would make it…"

He had made chowder plenty of times, so the only problem was if she would think hard enough to figure it out. The most popular flavor was officially *mentai*, apparently. *It's not* takoyaki*, it's not cheese, it's corn chowder. Please get it right!*

"All right, got it. I definitely know the answer."

"And what will it be?"

"Marine beef!"

"…That was a product of the early eighties."

Ryouta, of course, had never eaten or seen it. Why did the two of them even know about it anyway?

"Hmm, it would seem that your bond with your minion is nothing to write home about. Though I guess the contract between you two is only provisional anyway."

"That's not true! I know everything about him, from the top of his head to the tip of his nose!"

That was only half his face.

Even Ryouta could tell that Ouka was putting a lot of pressure on Shiren.

What Ouka wanted to say was this:

It's time you let your minion go.

Even if she didn't mean it too harshly, she was wondering if Shiren was even qualified to have Ryouta as a minion.

"Shiren, I think you should stop fussing so much over your minion and start studying. You're failing Japanese, English, math, science, social studies, music, PE, and home economics."

That was almost every class.

He knew she slept through school, but he didn't know it was *that* bad.

"Studying isn't the entirety of one's education. A person is more than an adjusted standard deviation score. I think we need an educational system that puts more value into our humanity."

"That's not convincing at all…," Ryouta had to interject.

"And you, too, Big Sis. You have official business to attend to; should you really be wasting time here?"

“I am not wasting time. I’m actually thinking about how I can import some top-quality bread loaves from overseas. Be quiet.”

“You can’t just casually mention that during an argument!”

He could easily imagine her letting slip national secrets during a diplomatic affair, so that was dangerous.

Since arriving in the Empire, Ryouta’s experiences had gradually turned him into the type of person who had a retort for everything.

Thankfully, the bell rang. It was time for second period.

“That’s enough, you two,” he said. “Give it a rest.”

“Okay, I’ll back off for now. Shiren, it’s time to be a good girl and get some sleep.”

“Yes, I think I’ll do just that.”

“Shiren, don’t you realize she’s making fun of you for sleeping in class so much…?”

*Tamaki had also been watching and waiting to join the conversation, but it ended before she got a chance.

It didn’t seem like Shiren and Ouka were getting along.

Even Ryouta could tell—when he paid attention.

Why did things end up this way? As Shiren’s minion as well as Ouka’s vassal in name, he could never get a moment’s rest. And to make matters worse, when he faced forward during class, he could barely concentrate because he was always looking at Kiyomizu.

He was relieved when lunchtime finally rolled around.

“All right, Ryouta, it’s lunchtime! Let’s head to the roof at once. We brought our lunches today!”

“No need to get so excited. You look even more like a little kid.”

Eating in the student cafeteria every day would have heavily impacted their finances, so Ryouta had been making lunch more often recently.

Today was one of those days; he had made two identical lunches and packed them in their respective boxes.

It was fairly typical, with a small fried omelet, bacon-wrapped potatoes, *kinpira*, boiled spinach, and (store-bought) tofu patties, but all things considered, this array of dishes was the most delicious.

“Mm, simple is best. It’s on another level of refinement from the

cafeteria!”

Shiren dug into her food straightaway. Ryouta couldn’t see the point in wolfing it down.

The sky was clear, and the sunshine felt nice and warm. As long as he could eat his lunch in peace, he felt like he could restore some of his sanity.

But—

“Ryouta, my dearest, I brought you a special lunch handmade by yours truly! Please enjoy it!”

Kiyomizu approached holding a cute pink lunch box. Was everyone coming to disturb him…?

He already had his own lunch, but he couldn’t just return it to her without even looking at it.

He decided to take a peek inside.

It featured many side dishes like sausages, scrambled eggs, natto inside fried tofu, burdock salad—and all of it was topped with a strange purple liquid.

He threw the food in a nearby garbage bin.

“No! You threw it all away without even tasting it! Please! Have one bite! Just one bite is enough for it to take effect!”

“You’re making it way too obvious that you drugged the food!”

The purple stuff was definitely some sort of aphrodisiac.

“At least bring him something that isn’t drugged! If you don’t take making lunch seriously, then it’s out of the question! How inconsiderate can you be to the farmers?! Go home! Leave!”

Surprisingly, Shiren chased Kiyomizu away with logic.

“Now, Ryouta, we can finally eat al—”

“Oh, hello, you two. *Lovely* day we’re having.”

It was Alfoncina this time.

Alfoncina XIII was a (third-year) high school girl who just so happened to be the archbishop, the highest-ranking clergy of the Holy Church of the Sacred Blood, which was the national religion of the Sacred Blood Empire. Even though she was essentially the second most powerful person in the country, she was just an older girl whose level of influence wasn’t readily apparent.

“Oh, Archbishop. Honestly, I didn’t really want you to come by today…”

There was a look of annoyance on Shiren's face.

"Oh my. It seems I have some lunch left over. I can't let it go to waste, so I was wondering if you would take it off my hands."

The archbishop's lunch was mixed vegetable tempura, daikon boiled with yuzu peppers, simmered mushrooms, and fried tofu vegetable fritters called *ganmodoki*.

It wasn't that unique, but it was still a lot of effort for a boxed lunch.

"You sure made something time-consuming, as always."

"Home cooking comes from the heart, after all! Now please try some of the vegetable tempura first, you two. Oh, I haven't added any aphrodisiacs or anything weird. A chef must not play around when it comes to *real* cooking."

"The last time I visited, you put something in the juice—"

"Home cooking comes from the heart, after all! Now please try some of the vegetable tempura first, you two. Oh, I haven't added any aphrodisiacs or anything weird. A chef must not play around when it comes to *real* cooking."

"Whoa! She repeated herself perfectly, just like an NPC in a video game! Am I not supposed to point that out? I get it! I'd be fine if you said *juice isn't cooking* or gave some other excuse!"

"I'm sure you'll get into heaven, Ryouta."

"That's a cheap promise!"

If that was all it took to get into heaven, then he wouldn't want to go; it didn't sound like they had very high standards.

"I have to warn you, I'm very picky about flavor."

He spent every day in the Fuyukura kitchen. Even though Alfoncina was older than he was, he had no intentions of giving her an insincere assessment.

Ryouta took a bite…

"……I—I lost."

…and fell to his knees after a mere three seconds.

"Why do you look like you were burned to ash in the wrestling ring? Hey, you're supposed to be like the underdog in an action manga. You're overreacting."

"Have a bite, Shiren… Then you'll understand…"

"What should I try? I'm very picky about food, you know."

Shiren took a bite, too. Tears immediately started pouring from her eyes.

"This…this isn't…fair…! To think you could fry vegetables to such perfection… What is this sweetness?! Is this how sweet vegetables are supposed to taste?! The texture is so light and crispy, and the freshness is perfectly preserved even after being fried! This isn't flour… It's wheat flour! Wheat flour! The more I chew, the more the flavor of the vegetables spreads throughout my mouth!"

"Cooking is a tool used to bring joy to the hearts of others. One cannot cut any corners if she doesn't want to utterly fail as a cook."

"So you're the archbishop, right? Is that your real job?!"

"Okay, Archbishop, that was quite tasty, but could you leave soon, please? Ryouta and I…"

"Oh my, that's a commoner's lunch."

At some point, Ouka and Sasara had started eating beside them. At a table with chairs. When did those get there? It was a mystery.

"You never try to fit in at school, do you?"

"I can't be stingy with lunch. In the rom-coms, the rich kid always brings lunch in fancy boxes, right? Those are cold and unrealistic. There's no way anyone could eat all of that."

"That is exactly right, Lady Ouka." Sasara instantly agreed with her.

"That's why I called in a chef to use the home ec classroom to make something for me. Now I can eat hot, fresh food. Oh my, am I a genius?"

"There's no need to second-guess yourself."

"Too true—my apologies for stating the obvious."

"Lady Ouka, which brand of wine would you like for after your meal?"

"Shut up! You're underage!"

He had to interject at some point. They could drink at home whenever they wanted, but they couldn't drink at school.

"Lighten up. Yelling during our meal will give us away."

"Because you're trying to drink out in the open at school!"

"It's all right. I won't be driving after."

"You don't even have a driver's license; you're not old enough!"

"Hmm? But I do have one."

He wasn't expecting that.

"Sasara, turn to the corresponding page in the Sacred Blood Compendium of Laws."

"Yes, Lady Ouka, it is right here."

He wasn't sure where she pulled it from, but Sasara immediately produced and presented the thick, dictionary-like compendium of law.

"It's written right here and here on these pages, see?"

Sacred Blood Empire Road Traffic Law Article 23

From birth, the emperor has the right to drive, and no one may revoke this right. However, the emperor will typically have servants drive her around in lieu of driving herself.

Sacred Blood Empire Alcohol Consumption Law Article 3

The emperor is a divine being and may consume any alcoholic beverage regardless of her age. However, in the event that the emperor's servants have deemed it to be unhealthy for the emperor to drink, the servants may discourage the emperor from doing so.

"…That sure is a convenient law."

"Of course the emperor has this authority. I can drive whenever I like with this."

"You shouldn't be drinking alcohol anyway. It's bad for your health."

"Oh, Ryouta, are you thinking about my body?"

Ouka's expression returned to a neutral one. Her large eyes caught his immediately.

"Of course. I am your vassal, after all. And even if I wasn't, I'd still be worried about my classmate's health. I've known you for a long time, too."

It was a little more embarrassing than he'd intended, but he hadn't said anything weird. He didn't think he had, at least.

"Huh. Well, I thank you for your concern. Would you like a bite of this steak?" She stuck a cut of the meat on her fork and held it out to Ryouta.

"Y-you shouldn't try to win people over with your status."

"Oh, that's too bad. This is the highest-quality Kobe beef. You've probably never tasted meat like this before."

“H-highest quality…?”

He swayed slightly at the temptation. No matter how much he loved cooking, financial reasons barred him from obtaining the highest-quality ingredients. What would it taste like?

“Whether one will experience joy in life is decided entirely by whether they can seize opportunities as they present themselves. You are definitely losing out in that regard, Ryouta. I suppose your life won’t be all that happy, and you’ll spend your days blaming others for your own weaknesses.”

“Fine! I’ll have some! You don’t have to say all that!” Just one bite couldn’t hurt. He bit into the meat on her fork. “I-i-i-it’s so gooooooood!!!” It was Ryouta’s turn to burst into tears. “What *is* this? What is this meat? It melted the moment it hit my tongue. It *melted*! And then the flavor spread through my entire mouth! Oh man, oh man, oh man! Beef is a flavor to be reckoned with!”

“What do you think? This is the meal of a ruler. The quality of the ingredients is so different that no matter how hard you work, Ryouta, you’ll never taste anything quite like it. Not even your skill can overcome that barrier.”

“Sorry, but I guess I’m better than you, too.” The archbishop scratched her head.

“I lost. In everything. Completely… I can’t believe I called myself good at cooking… Who cares if it’s just one of my few hobbies…? I’m like a kid playing house…”

Ryouta’s Cooking: Part 1

The End

“Calm down, Ryouta! You’re not a chef or anything! It wasn’t like we were having a food battle to begin with! It’s just lunchtime on the roof!”

They had gotten off point, true.

But why did it end up like this anyway?

“Oh, perhaps you got all grumpy because we bothered you during your time with your precious minion? Sorry, I’m such a clueless big sister.”

Ouka looked at Shiren with a face that read, *Heh, all according to plan!*

“I-I-I-I’m telling you, that’s not it! You’re reading too deep into it…”

There was that air between the two of them again.

It really did seem like Ouka was getting in the way of Ryouta’s and

Shiren's daily life together.

He didn't know why she would do that, but there was no doubt about it.

"Hey, Ryouta, it must be rough having to make lunch every day, right? Then why don't you let me prepare lunch for you? And for Shiren, too, of course. I mean, just one or two extra boxes isn't a big deal."

"Could you not make it sound like stuffing one or two extra *bodies* in your closet isn't a big deal? It is really tempting, honestly, but I can't imagine it being good for you eating that every day…"

"Then shall I make you lunch every other day?"

Alfoncina raised her hand. Was this heaven? Alternating days between the food of extraordinary chef Alfoncina XIII and palace cuisine…? Not only that, it would save him a ton of time on food prep.

"Oh, but I can't; you're probably busy…"

"But I caused you *so* much trouble last time, Ryouta. It would be a piece of cake if this was enough to have you forgive me. Or…do you not want to eat my food?"

Alfoncina placed a finger on her lips, her expression darkening.

It was so seductive, it almost made him sigh. He knew, he *knew* it was just a part of her persona, but he couldn't look away.

"I could never not want to eat your food! I'd actually want to eat it every day for every meal!"

"If you say so, then I'll have to do just that."

"Yes, please!"

Rub, rub.

Something was rubbed onto the back of his neck.

Right afterward, an indescribable pain shot through his body.

"Gaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaagh!!!"

The shock was so intense, it was almost like the great human revolution had occurred within him.

"Wow, it really is impressive to watch what happens when I put mustard on the part of your neck that I bit this morning. How interesting." Shiren lightly voiced her opinion, a tube of mustard paste in her hand.

"Why do you have something like that…?"

"I carry seasoning around with me for lunch. Over eighty percent of the reason I come to school is for lunch. I cannot compromise."

It was practically only for food.

“Th-this is bad enough to take you up to the Human Rights Commission…”

“That’s because you were shirking your duty as a minion!” Shiren puffed up her cheeks. “You will serve me, and you will not slack off on making lunch!”

“I wasn’t really trying to slack off…”

“Do you not want to be my minion?!”

If this went any further, she would end up in tears. He remembered that he was an irreplaceable element in Shiren’s life.

“You’re right. I can’t forget that.”

“Hmph, even if Alfoncina’s food is much more delicious…”

That was a gut punch.

“And even if palace food is much more refined…”

Another blow to the gut.

“Come on—can’t you show me more support…?”

“One must judge the flavor of food fairly. It is rude to the chef otherwise.”

No one was interjecting with comments on how Alfoncina was the archbishop anymore.

“Sorry, as Shiren’s minion, I have to make her lunch; and I’ll make my own, too.”

“And that’s that!” Shiren, beside him, puffed her chest out with a smile. “And, Big Sis, you’ll need to stop making moves on your little sister’s minion, okay?”

But Ryouta thought he heard Ouka reply, “I won’t lose to you, Shiren.”

They were still at odds with each other. It was only going to get worse. That was the feeling he got.

“Well, now that we’re done eating, we’re heading back, Sasara.”

“Of course. Lady Ouka, you might slip down the stairs, so please take my hand… *Hff.*”

“No. Your hands are sweaty.”

“Oh. If everyone’s leaving, then I will, too,” said Alfoncina.

“I need to talk to you later about the future political climate and your CD debut, Alfoncina.”

Ouka, Sasara, and Alfoncina—everyone with power—left one after another.

Until Ouka stopped short.

"Oh, right. It doesn't seem like you've noticed at all, so let me just tell you."

"Tell us what…?"

"You ate the steak off my fork, didn't you?"

"I won't be paying for that even if you order me to. The Fuyukura household doesn't have any money."

"You ate it off my fork, didn't you?" A vicious grin crept onto her face. "In a way, couldn't this be an indirect…you know?"

Ryouta's face turned bright red in an instant. Maybe he had just done something totally unthinkable.

"I—I think you're just exaggerating… Ha-ha-ha…"

His thoughts couldn't keep up, so he tried to brush it off with whatever came to mind first. Rather, that was his only choice. He couldn't let it affect him any more without things getting really bad.

But there was someone who was reeling several times more than Ryouta was—Shiren.

"Yeah! You're exaggerating! It's no big deal, the wound is shallow, and that's why I'll forget it all, I won't call it an indirect you-know-what, it's just a broad interpretation, an arbitrary use of the law, I want some steak."

"Calm down, Shiren. And why did you mention steak at the end?"

"Desire for meat. That is true carnal desire."

"Don't add fuel to the fire, Ouka!"

But there was also one other person reeling from this.

Vwoom!

Something whizzed by Ryouta's face. When he turned around, he saw an arrow sticking out of the concrete. Sasara stood in front of him, bow at the ready.

"A-an indirect you-know-what? Outrageous!"

"Crap! The biggest handful heard us!"

"The most *I've* been able to do is secretly lick plates that Lady Ouka has finished eating from, yet this knave has already reached such perverted heights!"

"Wait, wait! Secretly licking her plates is way more perverted!"

Her bow and arrow locked on to Ryouta.

"Ryouta Fuyukura, it would be terrible if I was to kill you, so I shall

offer options for your final plea. Please choose from the following.”

① GET SHOT
② GET SHOT
③ GET SHOT

“You’re not planning on letting me live at all!”

“Of course not. Firing!”

Sasara pulled back on the bowstring, but then someone hit her on the shoulder. It was Ouka.

“Oh, Lady Ouka, could it be that you have recognized my services, and you will give me a *direct* kiss—?”

“You’ve been licking my plates, so we have to talk. I was thinking about holding a court martial, and I want you to appear. It’s the death penalty if you say no.”

With an eerie smile on her face, Ouka took Sasara away. The reason behind her expression was a mystery, but she smiled all the same.

“It’s finally peaceful again.”

“Yes. We can relax and eat.”

Ryouta and Shiren started on their lunches again. At the end of the day, relaxation was the best thing they could ask for. And it was thanks to Sasara that they almost forgot about the indirect you-know-what.

“All right, I’m finished. Ryouta, we’re leaving!”

“Hey, you’ve got some rice on your cheek.”

“Oh.”

Shiren was about to reach up to take it off, but she then immediately brought her hand down.

“As part of your service…you take it off.”

“Sure, I can do that.”

Though he grumbled, he took the grain off her face. And put it in his mouth.

“Wait, I didn’t tell you to eat it…”

For some reason, Shiren looked at him like she hadn’t anticipated this.

Her face slowly grew red.

“But tossing it out would be rude to the farmers.”

“Y-you’re right… I knew it! My minion has a fantastic spirit for

service."

As they chatted, both of them went back down.

No one noticed Tamaki eating her lunch in a corner of the roof.

"Everyone's lunches had such well-defined characteristics, I couldn't just bring over my regular lunch to eat with them…"

Beside the lunch box Tamaki was eating from, there was another box of a different color.

"I thought I would be able to give this to him and say, *Um, I brought lunch for you today…* Why am I so unlucky…? No, I'm not unlucky. I'm just hopeless. Luck is always impartial, but it's my fault for not being brave or skilled enough… I know, the moment I blame luck, that's when it's all over. Such people will never grow. They will spend their entire lives as useless whiners. I am more suited to the shade anyway. I could never stand in the spotlight…"

*Tamaki continued talking to herself, but we will cut it short there.

They somehow managed to safely make it through the school day.

Well, maybe it wasn't as safe as it could have been.

"I'm way too tired… I want to get home and relax as soon as possible."

"No, we have to do our shopping today. We're going to Freshmart Warakia."

"Let's just deal with what we already have…"

On the other hand, Tamaki still had the lunch box out and was staring at it even after classes were over. She had two portions, so she couldn't eat it all.

If I take this home, my seventh mother will scold me. You are a terrible child for not eating all your food, Tamaki. I'm sure you'll find yourself in hell! *she'll say… But I can't eat this… I suppose I have to throw it away…*

Her eyes met with Ryouta's as he was heading out.

"Wait, you're still eating your lunch, Shijou?"

Oh…how embarrassing. I'm sorry…

"Oh, I just made a little too much, ha-ha… I was thinking about how much of a waste it would be to throw it away…"

Her eyes swam. There was no way she could tell him she'd made it for him.

“Hey, I’ll take it if you can’t finish it. What you have there should be able to fit in mine. You look like you’re in a lot of pain, Shijou,” Ryouta said, scratching his head. He was the type to tentatively extend a hand if he saw someone else in trouble, and Tamaki’s expression said she had a particularly complicated problem.

“I—I, that’s, um…”

“Oh, but obviously, if I’m bothering you, then I’ll leave you alone…”

“Th-th-th…tha… No, I’m sorry! I’m sorry that someone as useless as myself is causing you trouble!”

She was so happy for Ryouta’s suggestion and sorry at the same time; her heart was so full of emotions that she started to cry.

“Ooh…ooh…*sniff*…”

There were so many feelings jumbled up inside her that she couldn’t help but cry.

“Wait, hold on! Why are you crying?!”

“I’m sorry! I’m crying over how small I am…and how great you are… Ooh…ooh… I will be sure to grow up to be someone who won’t cause problems for anyone else… I will pay my taxes on time; I will separate my garbage properly… When the newspaper salesman comes by, I’ll be sure to sign up for a month’s subscription… If I get a fraudulent distress call, I’ll pretend not to notice and pay the fee…”

“You don’t have to force yourself to sign up for the newspaper, and don’t pay the fee.”

Tamaki seemed to be the type who would have five different papers sent to her house.

“It’s nothing to cry over anyway! Stop!”

“I’m sorry… Ooh…*sniff*… Now it looks like you made me cry… I’m sure that’s even more trouble for you… I’m sorry, I’m sorry… It’s all my fault…”

“I—I know you’re just telling me the truth, but it sounds like I’m a really bad person here…”

“I’m so, so sorry for causing you all this trouble—I’m sorry! I’m sorry that you pinned me down back then, too!”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa! People will misunderstand, so don’t talk about that!”

“No, it’s all my fault… And I’m sorry for biting you! It was just on a

whim!”

At some point, everyone around them had started staring with blank expressions.

It was clearly because she had said “pinned me down.” He had a feeling that at this rate, people would start losing their trust in him. People’s trust in him was already at an all-time low; was he going to be okay?

But that wasn’t all.

Some of the boys in the class were gathering.

“Fuyukura made Shijou cry…”

“And she said she bit him…”

“He’s finally started making girls cry even when they have nothing to do with him…”

“The die has been cast… We have crossed the Rubicon… The enemy is in Honno-ji—no, right here in our class!”

©Hiroki Ozaki

All their expressions and postures and attitudes were vastly different. But there was one thing they had in common.

Glinting under the fluorescent lights were the twelve-inch rulers in their hands.

“Ryouta Fuyukura, your acts have been causing problems with the girls in our class, and we can’t let you carry on any longer! We will defeat you, vile dictator, and bring freedom and reform to this classroom! Everyone, follow me, Kotaro Yamahara!”

Yamahara, the boys’ leader, stepped out in front.

This was probably Yamahara’s shining moment of the school year. Behind him, there were even voices that said, “Who is this guy?” He didn’t particularly stand out. Not even Ryouta remembered his name right away.

“This is a mistake, guys! I’m innocent! I didn’t do anything!”

“Heh! It’s not like we’re jealous of how popular you are or anything!”

Oh, he was annoying *and* a liar.

“Hey, come on, Shiren! Say something!”

This was bad; he turned to Shiren for help. It was a cheap tactic, but maybe if a girl said they were wrong, the boys wouldn’t be able to do anything to him.

“You want me to say something?”

“Yes. Please, as repayment for all my service to date! I’m clearly in a pinch right now!”

“Huh, okay.” Shiren looked around at the class for a moment.

Everyone held their breath.

He couldn’t imagine what Shiren might say, now that she had been put on the spot.

After thinking it over for a bit, she said, “I have your answer,” and pushed Ryouta forward slightly. “I believe in you, Ryouta.”

“What?! You’re not gonna cover for me?! This is not the kind of help I had in mind!”

“There’s a superstition that lions drop their children into ravines to raise them. This is the same thing.”

“If you know it’s a superstition, then don’t buy into it!”

“No, actually, you’ve been getting a little more rebellious recently, so I think this is perfect. It’s fine; they’re weaker than Sasara. It seemed like you were going after Tamaki, too, so consider this your punishment for that.”

Given they were attacking him with the intent to kill, this seemed a little excessive.

But if he said anything to bring up Tamaki again, the situation would probably only get worse, so there was really nothing he could do.

"All right, men, we've gotten permission! Attack! Don't stop until he's ready to scream at the sight of a ruler! After we've caught him, stab him with the thirty-degree side of a right triangle! Stab him until the corner's blunt!"

"""""Yeeeaaahhh!!"""""

The boys all raised the rulers in their hands and rushed at Ryouta.

"This is the worst!"

Now that his opponents were coming at him with force, he had no choice but to run for the hallway.

"Crap, he's fast! Don't fall behind!"

In an odd case of luck, he was a fast runner. His life had left him with many opportunities to hone that particular skill.

"I knew this would happen one day! I'm innocent!"

"Dammit! He's going to get away at this rate! Get Takashima or Miyoshi from the track-and-field team!"

"Captain, both of them have girlfriends and lives, so they are not a part of our group!"

"Those damn track-and-fielders! I'll put jelly and thumbtacks in their shoes!"

"What should we do? Are any of us secretly good at sports?"

"I'm good at bowling!"

"That doesn't make you good at sports!"

Ryouta wasn't sure how, but he had a feeling that things would work themselves out.

On the other hand, he was outnumbered.

The gap between them wasn't closing, but he was being chased into a part of the school with little traffic.

"Crap. Things will just get worse over here…"

"Men, let's keep this up!"

"Yeah, I'm gonna smack him with my ruler!"

"I'll get him with three at once!"

"I'll stab him with the edge!"

“I think the only thing this way is the nurse’s office… After that is just a dead end, I’m pretty sure…”

If it was closed or empty, then it would be the end for him.

The anxiety was weakening his stride, and they were getting closer to him.

He couldn’t turn back, so all he could do was put his faith in the nurse’s office.

“Please be open!”

Then he placed his hand on his only hope.

—*Krk.*

It was the heartrending sound of a locked door.

“Why is it locked…?!”

The subjugation crew was coming up right behind him.

“Today isn’t your lucky day. Now this is where we take sanctions against him, men.”

“We’ll make sure you change that rotten personality of yours!”

“Our revolution with rulers!”

“Ruler Revolution!”

The group raised their rulers above their heads and surrounded Ryouta. Visually, it sort of looked like it was some kind of legendary festival, except less tasteful, obviously.

But then—

—*Ka-lack.*

The door to the nurse’s office unlocked from the inside.

—*Rata-ta-ta-ta-ta…*

And the door slid open.

“It’s not pleasant to watch a crowd of people ganging up on a single person!”

A girl gallantly stood in front of Ryouta, her long ponytail trailing behind her.

“Sasara…”

Sasara Tatsunami had become Ryouta’s shield.

She was wearing her school uniform instead of her knightly attire, and she exuded the air of a warrior as she held a bamboo training sword. But he wasn’t sure why she would appear from the nurse’s office with a training sword.

“Apologies, I locked the door from the inside. I thought it was noisy out here, but I didn’t expect this.”

Sasara glanced behind Ryouta, and then faced front again.

“Are you not ashamed of yourselves? Well, I understand how unforgivable you find this man, and if I had to choose, I would rather assist you. I would rather take five rulers at once and smack him senseless with them.”

“Wait, you’re not here to help me?!”

“But in that case, I would just invite him to battle, fair and square. I grow irritated watching how cowardly you act—it’s like I’m looking into a mirror at my past self.”

It was a simple but weighty sentence.

Sasara had been the very one to put together a surprise attack to defeat Shiren. That might have been the disgrace of a lifetime for a warrior like her.

That was why she couldn’t ignore others who were trying to do something just as reprehensible.

“You’ve gotten a lot stronger, Sasara…”

It was almost like she had gained more dignity and beauty.

“And I cannot allow Ryouta Fuyukura to die in a place like this—**I will be marrying him, after all**.”

An awkward silence fell over them.

“Sorry, Sasara—I think I went deaf for a second. Did you say ‘marrying’ or ‘mauling’…?”

“I m-made no mistake. ‘Marrying.’ That is what I said.”

His excuse that he’d misheard was roundly destroyed.

“There might be a future where you kill me, sure, but I don’t think there’s a future where we get married in any possible reality!”

“It’s your fault! You made me lick your blood! Licking the blood of a man I have no intentions of marrying is unacceptable in the distinguished Tatsunami family!”

Her face was bright red, almost as though she was going to cut him down right there and then.

And if those extras behind her with their rulers hadn’t been there, she probably would have.

“What?! Why did Fuyukura make her lick his blood?”

“These high school kids sure are acting mature for their age!”

“I knew he was our enemy—no, the enemy of all women!”

The news was causing a significant stir among the boys.

“Drinking blood really is that embarrassing for the Sacred Blooded…?”

“Y-yes…”

The typically bold Sasara nervously looked down. Her feet had even started pointing inward.

Was what he’d done like making moves on a girl from a noble family?

But if he hadn’t done it, then she probably would have broken down and died…

“I thought you were only interested in women…”

“It seems there’s been a misunderstanding… I only love Lady Ouka, but that does not mean I am only romantically interested in women.”

It was an unnecessary question, and he now felt like he’d gotten himself stuck in quicksand.

“I—I hope that you don’t misunderstand me; I would only be doing it out of necessity… Of course, the one I love most in the entire universe is Lady Ouka…and I barely care for you at all; I would marry you in form only. Do try to understand.”

“I get it! You don’t have to spell it out!”

“Good, as long as you understand. Now, which one of you would like to fall to my sword?”

“What should we do, men?” Yamahara asked his friends.

“It is disgraceful for a man to raise his hand against a woman…”

“But it’d be disgraceful if we ran away now.”

“I don’t wanna get hurt.”

“I really don’t think we can win with rulers here.”

None of them wanted to step forward in a situation like this.

Until one of them did with a single ruler in hand. “…Leave this to me. I am a masochist. I will graciously fall to Tatsunami’s blade! Ohhhh, Tatsunami, prepare yourself! Dowahhchagralmee!”

One young man with a bright future fell to her sword.

“Dammit, you guys, we can’t lose until we crack down on all the guys who actually get girls!”

“““”We apologize and humbly accept defeat.”””

The rest of the boys surrendered.

“Guys! Where’d your hatred go?!” Yamahara was the only one shocked by the situation.

“Fighting begets nothing, after all. I hope the world knows peace one day. I love Lady Ouka.”

“Your fantasies are slipping through, there.”

Her last sentence rendered everything that came before it worthless.

“By the way, why were you in the nurse’s office? Are you under the weather?”

She had seemed fine and healthy in the morning. Was it that thing that happens only to women…?

“No, I wouldn’t say that… But yes, let’s say I was under the weather…”

That sounded fishy.

The door to the nurse’s office slid open again. “You forgot this, Tatsunami,” the nurse called, holding something large.

Maybe he was imagining it, but he thought it looked like an Ouka body pillow.

“Ahhh! I’ll come collect it later, so please just leave it there! I still don’t have copyright permission from Lady Ouka, so I can’t have her learning of this!”

“What on Earth were you doing in there?!”

“Nothing shameful at all. I was in the nurse’s office because I felt a bit under the weather. But I cannot sleep without my own special pillow, so I was using that one. I was fortunate that I happened to bring it along today. The design may make it seem like she is in her underwear, but that is just the way it looks.”

She spoke incredibly stiffly, as though she was reading from a prompter.

“I feel like I understand why you locked it from the inside now, but I’m way too scared to point it out.”

Sasara squeezed the stuffed Ouka doll on her belt.

“Silence! I am the law! You will never be in a position to talk back to me!”

“Don’t brush me off with the recording!”

Behind her, the nurse (Marina Yano, thirty-two, married) emerged. “Allow me to speak as the nurse—we were doing exercises for health and physical education.”

“That’s way too blunt!”

Was the nurse okay? Well, she had accepted a student and her body pillow, so probably not.

"Well then, I am going home… I need to return to Lady Ouka's side." As if her business had concluded, Sasara turned to leave.

"Sure, take care. And…" He was a little embarrassed to say it, but he had to. "You saved me. I owe you."

"Wh…? Why did you say that?!"

Sasara twisted around, her expression bewildered. There was a tinge of red to her face, too.

"Hey, it's not something to get upset over."

"Once you say that, then it means I must say my part, too, does it not…?" She readied herself, lightly inhaled, and said, "Thank you for saving me before."

Sasara smiled bashfully and then left.

Oh no, she's super cute when she smiles genuinely…

She was typically a little slow, so he'd almost forgotten, but Sasara was a real gentlewoman. A beautiful young lady.

If she had said *Let's get married* with that smile, then he might have fallen into a dangerous pit.

But first, he needed to meet back up with Shiren—

"Tatsunami left."

"Ryouta Fuyukura's the only one left."

"Let's do it."

"Yeah!"

The boys, who had been groveling on the floor a moment ago, stood back up.

"You guys are awful losers! Just give up!"

"We can't do that."

"We must satisfy our grudges!"

"Watch your back, normie!"

Ryouta dashed straight down the hall, but he was probably nearing his end. Sasara's overwhelming might had just managed to dampen their rage, but without anything that could match her, how was he supposed to pacify them?

Was there anything open to him that could let him mediate between both

those things?

Oh no, he was coming up on another dead end…

A door that said HOME ECONOMICS CLASSROOM stood at the end of the hall. He could rush inside and ask for help if clubs were active today, but it was closed now.

"We will be victorious this time!"

"Even if I don't have a life, I still won't be sad about it!"

"You can spend your teens with other guys; it's still fun!"

"If it stays this way until I'm thirty, I'll become a monk!"

The ruler gang closed the distance one step at a time.

Was it finally time for his public execution…?

But then the door on the right—the home ec prep room—slid open with a rattle.

"Oh my, a fight! As the archbishop, I am greatly saddened by this sight."

"Alfoncina!"

Alfoncina, dressed in an apron, emerged from the side.

"I was just about to bake a cake. Oh, but I'm sorry, Ryouta."

"Why? There's nothing to apologize for…"

"I'm wearing an apron now, but I'm unfortunately not nude underneath."

"Please remember that you're part of the clergy!"

"I'm only half kidding." Alfoncina stepped forward to cover Ryouta. "Come now. Fighting is bad! Fighting will put you all on the path to hell in the Holy Church of the Sacred Blood. I'm the archbishop, and if I say so, it's true."

That's right! The archbishop could use her religious authority to mediate! If war itself is bad, then that would help me, too…

"See, it's on page fifty-three of the scripture: *Fighting only begets sadness*."

One of the boys seemed to be pious, and he immediately pulled a mini scripture from his uniform pocket and opened to the page she had mentioned.

"Archbishop, that page is an illustrated page and doesn't have any words. Look, it's a picture of a panty shot."

The boy showed them.

And just as he said, it was a picture of a panty shot.

"Oh, you're right. Alfoncina, you need to be— Wait, this is a light novel!"

Having illustrated pages in the holy scripture was a strange enough concept already.

"But more people will read if it has pictures, and more copies will sell… But some hesitated to buy it because the cover and illustrations were too risqué, so we played it safe with the cover…"

"That is a weirdly vivid way to put it."

"And the serialized comic adaptation drawn by Bluh D. Dee is being published in the monthly *Comic Vamper*."

"Wait, I heard that name before, in history class!"

He thought that name didn't matter; he certainly wasn't expecting to hear it again…

"Well anyway, fighting only belongs on the court. Otherwise, it's to hell with you. As the archbishop, I declare that there is a hell. According to our doctrines, there are ten levels of hell, and you'll taste the pain and pleasure of misery in each…"

"Pleasure?!"

"Oh, there might be some masochists about."

"Hell can't cope with masochists, either… By the way, what kinds of levels are they?"

Sometimes, Ryouta got very uneasy over whether or not Alfoncina was really doing her job as the archbishop.

"Oh, don't you believe me? I remember what they are. The first level of hell is curry hell: a place of regret where you realize that you've forgotten to cook the rice after making curry. This repeats for eternity."

"I see you started from a very mundane place."

That was probably because it was still only the first level.

"The second level of hell is train hell: a place where you run to catch a train, but it always leaves right as you're about to make it. This repeats for eternity."

"That's still pretty mundane."

"The third level of hell is bicycle hell: a place where you try to leave with your bike from the parking lot where you left it, but then a couple starts making out right in front of you, which makes it difficult to pass

them, and you have trouble undoing the lock, and your bike falls over and causes a domino effect that topples the other bikes. This repeats for eternity."

"That's awkward! That's super awkward! I mean, it doesn't really matter, but I'm noticing all these hells are taking place in the modern day."

"The fourth level of hell is diner hell: a place where you give your order to the restaurant staff, but they always, without fail, bring out a different dish. No matter how many times you mention it, they always bring out the wrong one. This repeats for eternity."

"You even put diners in hell?!"

"By the way, the hourly rate of the staff in hell is three hundred and fifty yen."

"That's so low! That really is hell!"

"The fifth level of hell is camera hell: a place where you feel like you're forgetting something before you leave on a trip, but you can't remember what. Then, when you finally arrive at your destination, you realize you forgot your camera. You're disappointed, but you have no choice but to continue with your travels. This repeats for eternity."

"We're halfway through, but it's getting hard to tell them apart…"

"The sixth level of hell is toilet hell: a place where you go into the bathroom when you can barely hold it, but they're all occupied. It doesn't seem like any will open anytime soon. This repeats for eternity!!!"

"Okay, *that's* hell! And you're emphasizing it more!"

"The seventh level of hell is mom hell: a place where you're watching TV and the scene starts to get a little steamy just as your mom walks in. This repeats for eternity. I'm sure you've experienced this before, Ryouta."

"Urgh… I'd say that never happened, but I'd be lying…"

Why did parents always enter at the absolute worst time? It was a mystery.

"I've gotten tired of doing this, so I'll give you the abridged version. The eighth level of hell is jigsaw hell, where you'll never be able to find the last piece of your puzzle. The ninth level of hell is last episode hell, where you'll always miss the last episode of an anime or drama. And the tenth level of hell is missing square hell, where you will constantly do well but never get a full bingo. If you live a wicked life, you will find yourself in one of these hells!"

“I’m gonna get right to the point and say that’s a really low-stakes hell.”

“It was much bloodier long ago, but there was a regulation that said it was bad for children’s upbringing, so now it’s like this!”

“Are you okay with this, Archbishop?!” Ryouta retorted.

Just then, he could hear the soft slapping of Yamahara hitting his ruler against his hand.

“Don’t ignore us! Talk about hell all you want, but don’t blatantly ignore us like that!”

“Crap, he found me out!”

Apparently, ignoring Yamahara had been added to his growing list of crimes.

“Anyway, you should never chase a single person as a group. I’ll always side with the weaker one!”

Then Alfoncina grinned like a cat—or so he thought.

In the next moment, a soft, squishy sensation engulfed Ryouta’s arm.

“Let’s all have a nice group hug. Tee-hee~.”

Alfoncina wrapped her arms around him.

Which meant she was hugging him. Which meant that soft, squishy sensation was…

“Alfoncina! What are you doing?! Please move! They’re touching me!”

“Hmmmm? What’s touching you?”

At present, the only thought he had for this member of the clergy was *You demon*. She was definitely getting enjoyment out of this.

The subjugation crew grew agitated.

“Man… I’m jealous…”

“He’s even enticed the archbishop; what a godless deed…”

“Wish I was him.”

“Wish I was him.”

“Wish I was him.”

“Wish I was him.”

Of course they’d be jealous.

“As long as you all stay here, I’ll protect the weak. I *am* the archbishop, after all. Oh, Ryouta, no one’s in the prep room. Do you want to go in with me?”

“And do what, Alfoncina? Do what?!”

If he casually agreed, then she’d probably make him her minion.

“What should we do, men?”

“There’s no point if we don’t put a stop to this enviable situation!”

“We have no choice but to make a strategic retreat!”

“But what about his punishment?”

It sounded like the boys were at odds.

Hair brushed against Ryouta’s face. Alfoncina’s body was almost flush with his.

“Heh-heh… Things will only get more and more intense unless they go away… Oh no~.”

“S-stop! Seriously!”

He felt like he was in a game of chicken with his own reasoning. All his blood had rushed to his head, and he felt like he was going to faint. He really did wish she would stop acting so suggestively. He had to take all her jokes seriously. That was how high her base stats were.

“Stop! Jealousy and envy are problems of a totally different caliber, and we can deal with those! But you’ll be expelled!” Yamahara was yelling, having lost his cool, but Alfoncina wasn’t listening at all.

“It seems they’ll be staying here, so perhaps I should kiss you? It is also the job of the archbishop to spread the philanthropic spirit…”

“You’re not planning on doing that at all! Come on, guys—you need to get out of here! Logic and reason go right out the window when she gets like this!” Ryouta desperately begged Yamahara. If he ended up expelled over this, he wasn’t sure what kind of punishment Shiren would have waiting for him.

©Hiroki Ozaki

“Men, pull back! We’re not running; this is a tactical retreat! Don’t look at the embrace any longer! Our eyes will rot!”

“Everyone, out!”

“Dammit!”

“Down with war!”

“But normies should die!”

“Die in the rom-com war!”

The subjugation crew finally left.

He was safe now, but it didn’t seem like their hatred had abated; if anything, it was worse now.

“And that settles it!”

“Yeah. And since things are settled now, could you let go…?”

It would be embarrassing if someone saw him locked in Alfoncina’s embrace. Not just embarrassing but bad for his social life at school.

“Where should we continue, Ryouta? The prep room is open, and it would be so immorally exhilarating if we went to the student guidance room, wouldn’t it?” she whispered in his ear, and he grew light-headed.

“Please don’t strive for immorality, Archbishop!”

He was a meek kid and, at the end of the day, a high school boy.

“Awww~. But I didn’t say I’d save you for free… Why can’t you just let me have a little sip?”

Alfoncina said “sip,” clear as day.

“So that’s what you’re after…”

“You don’t mind, do you? It would be fine for just a minute. You won’t *completely* turn into a minion!”

“No.”

She said “just a minute,” but she was definitely planning on drinking his blood until he was a total minion.

She had almost made him her minion in the cathedral when they first met, too.

“Oh, are you going against me? Even when I’m roughly twenty percent your master?”

Don’t disobey me.

Her voice echoed in his head. It didn’t just happen once; it repeated over and over again.

Yes—Ryouta was ever so slightly under Alfoncina’s control.

It wasn't like he was being brainwashed, but he couldn't summon the strength to refuse.

"Okay, it should be fine if it's only for a minute…"

"Oh yes. It's just like faith. You don't need to be so serious; just take it nice and slow, little by little…"

"Oh, I see."

The voice sounded like his own, but it felt like someone else was talking.

"And if you like it, then we can just keep going. Right?"

"That's true. As long as you respect my free will—"

Then something latched on to his neck—a familiar ropelike object.

He had a terrible feeling, but it was already too late.

This wasn't a rope; it was a chain. The chain of his collar.

"Ahhhhh!"

Something was pulling him in with the chain around his neck.

At the end of it was Shiren, furious with rage.

"I thought you'd gotten away, only to find you two hugging here. I see, I see."

"Hold on! Cool down a second. There's no real mea—"

"Don't waste your breath. None of it." Shiren poked him in the eyes.

"Again?!"

A pain more dangerous than the rulers ran through his body. Why did his whole body hurt even though he only got poked in the eyes? Maybe she knew about a unique pressure point or something.

"Now then, you'll be ending your treatment of Ryouta right there, Alfoncina! You were trying to make him your minion again, weren't you?! Give me a break!"

Shiren glared at the taller upperclassman in protest.

"Sorry~. I'm not playing around with Ryouta anymore."

"That's not the problem! Someone at your level could easily manipulate other people's feelings, so you need to stop—now!"

"Oh, sorry~." Alfoncina bowed her head quickly. "I didn't think Ryouta would waver as much as he did…"

"Huh…?"

Something in what she said caught his attention. Alfoncina wasn't being malicious. That was why he felt like there was a great big problem hidden

somewhere in there…

Then a third voice butted in.

"I knew it—your master-minion relationship is awful… *Sigh*." Ouka folded her arms and stood beside him. "Shouldn't you just break up at this point? I mean, like a band does."

"No, no, that's not happening. Ryouta and I are bound by deep ties!"

"Pfft."

"She snorted at me! You might be the emperor, but you're still mean for snorting at your little sister!"

"Okay, we'll leave it at that," she said in a monotone. "By the way, change of topic." Ouka turned to look at Ryouta. "Tomorrow's Saturday, Ryouta, and I'll be showing you around the palace then. Please be sure to come."

"What?"

How was that related to anything?

"See, you are one of my subordinates, so you should know the layout of the castle. If there's an uprising, you'll have to rush to the castle and die in my stead, you know."

"I have to die?! And there's no way I could ever pose as you! Am I supposed to wear your clothes?!"

"Nothing is impossible if you work hard enough. You could even walk around naked on the seafloor."

"Thanks for the words of motivation, but no! And it's not like I can walk naked on the seafloor anyway!"

But it was still a problem that one of her own retainers didn't know the inside of the castle.

"Then your little sister should take a good look around, too."

It didn't seem like Shiren knew the interior of the castle, either.

"Right. I barely know what it's like in there. Big Sis, I ask that you take me along as well."

"Oh, no, there's no oversight here. You have to go to school for makeup lessons that day, Shiren."

Ouka grinned.

It was the kind of smile that would send a pure-hearted child into tears.

"Oh…right, I have makeup lessons for Japanese and English and math and social studies and world history and biology and chemistry…"

“That’s almost our entire curriculum! That’s because you’re always sleeping in class!”

He wouldn’t be able to go to the castle on Saturday like this.

Would she even be able to finish all those lessons in one day anyway?

“Then you’ll be coming to the castle tomorrow, Ryouta. This is an Imperial order.”

“F-fine…”

When she put it like that, he had no choice but to agree.

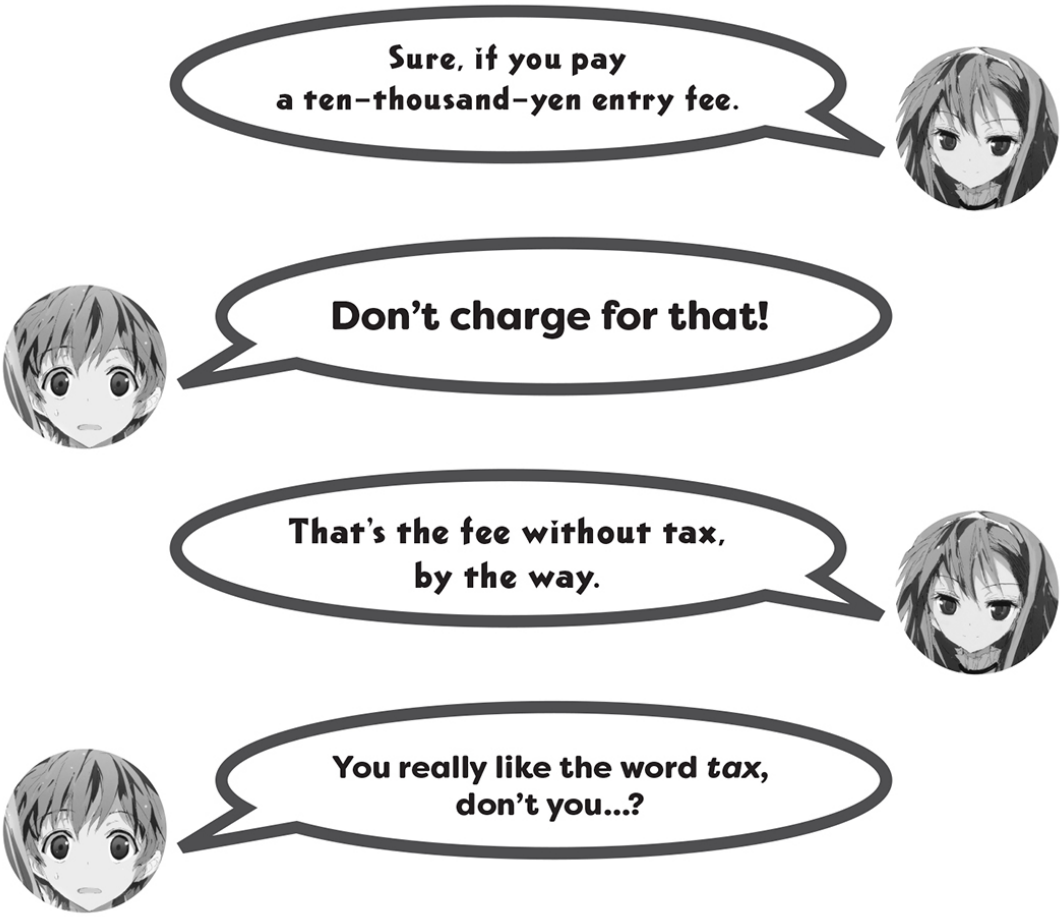
“I will show you every nook and cranny, so be ready. See you later.” As Ouka left, he heard her quietly add, “I will have no blind spots.”

Shiren, on the other hand, was standing there, shivering.

“Wh-what should we do…?”

You Call That Service? Q&A

■ **Question for Ouka**
I would like to have a tour of the castle.
Would that be possible?



©Hiroki Ozaki

EPISODE 3

LET'S CURSE BIG SIS!

©Hiroki Ozaki

EPISODE 3

LET'S CURSE BIG SIS!

"All right, today I'm going to splurge on the most expensive tomatoes. I hope you're ready for this!"

"Yeah…"

"I'll make more tomato consommé soup than I usually do. You can have as much as you want."

"Yeah…"

"Hey, are you terminally ill or something? What's wrong?"

Despite all the tomatoes he purchased at Freshmart Warakia, Shiren was still in low spirits.

She would typically get all excited and say something like, *Excellent, minion! I shall offer you praise!* But unusually, she didn't look like she was having much fun.

"Great… Yaaay, tomatoes."

"You must be seriously ill."

There was a problem if anyone thought she was happy like this.

"Okay, here's a question: Explain Zoroastrianism."

"It is a religion established by Zoroaster in ancient times… Fire is considered holy… It sees this world as the battleground between the holy lord Ahura Mazda and the angry spirit Angra Mainyu… The scripture is called Avesta… Other religions such as Manichaeism were established due to its influence… There are people who still follow this faith in India and other places today…"

"That was one hundred percent correct. You *are* ill."

Shiren normally wouldn't be able to answer that. She was taking makeup classes for just about all her subjects.

But she was perfectly energetic not that long ago, so she doesn't seem sick…

Still a little uneasy, they returned home to their run-down house on the

castle grounds.

"I'm tired… *Sigh*, I don't feel like doing anything. Nothing at all…"

Even once they got home, Shiren collapsed on the living room couch like a seal.

But that might have given her a bit of energy back.

"I understand you don't want to do anything, but you have more makeup classes tomorrow, so maybe you should study a—"

"☆NO☆CAN☆DO☆"

"How did you just say no with new embellishments?!"

"Ryouta. If you make me study, then I won't be me anymore. My identity would crumble."

"I'm okay with leaving that part of your identity by the wayside."

He thought it was unusual for someone to resist studying this much.

"People usually do things they need to do when they're cornered."

"I'm not cornered yet at all."

"Just study."

"Ryouta, do not use that word in front of me. I'm busy right now; I have plenty of other things that I need to think about. Oh, busy, busy, so very busy, busy, busy."

Someone who was actually busy wouldn't repeat the word so many times.

"Then what do you have to think about?"

"Urgh…" Shiren cradled her head. This was definitely the pose of someone in a predicament. "Hey, Ryouta……I want to check something with you."

It sounded like she was having a lot of trouble asking.

"Sure, what is it?"

"The entire population of heaven and earth all know that you, right now, are my minion."

"How much do you need to emphasize it? Sure, yeah, I'll acknowledge that."

"And your first crush was……my big sis, right?"

There was no doubt about it. It was embarrassing having someone say it straight to his face, but there was no doubt about it.

“Well, y-yeah.” He nodded slowly.

Everything was true up until that point. There was nothing there for him to refute.

Shiren wouldn’t confirm the truth without a reason, of course. That was why what came next was important.

“So what do you want to ask?”

Once she broached the topic, she must have some kind of question about it.

“We’re…having hamburg steak for dinner tonight, right?”

“Don’t change the topic. Ten out of fifteen people would think you were skirting the issue.”

“Who was the mastermind behind the assassination of the third Kamakura shogunate, Minamoto no Sanetomo?”

“You only ever talk about Japanese history when you want to avoid the subject.”

“Ahem, ahem.”

Shiren made a deliberate cough.

“Then…… ……do you like anyone right now?”

“……”

“……”

An uncomfortable silence fell over them.

They say that silence is golden and that eloquence is silver, but silence right now was terrible.

“Nah, not really right now…”

It was probably better that he responded like that for the moment. He hadn’t really considered anyone as a serious crush. He’d had way too many weird encounters to be able to think clearly.

“Really…? Big Sis is your classmate now…… …… What about that?”

“What about what?”

“I mean, like, did you have a sudden revelation that you like her after all or something.”

Shiren seemed very uncomfortable with this topic.

“Well, I say ‘first crush,’ but that was back in elementary school… It

was such a long time ago, so I think there might be some distance now…”

Nothing he’d said was a lie. He was repeating himself now, but he had been in way too many weird encounters for him to think clearly about Ouka. And since she was the emperor now, there were a lot of problems regarding status…

“You don’t have to hold back, you know?”

“Ha-ha-ha, who do I need to hold back from?”

“Y-yeah, you’re right… Well, I was just wondering, you know, just a bit…”

“Ha-ha-ha-ha.”

“Ha-ha-ha-ha.”

This was awkward…

“Well, I guess I better get started on dinner. We’re having hamburg steak tonight, and that takes a little while.”

Ryouta withdrew with his excuse.

What did he think of Ouka?

Ryouta pondered this as he washed the mountain of tomatoes.

He didn’t hate her, that was for sure. But he didn’t know if he still liked her after all this time…

All he could say was *I don’t know*. That answer made him feel like a politician trying to hide a bribery scandal, but he just didn’t know.

Maybe if it had been only a year or two of separation, his crush on her would have rekindled. But it had been almost seven years. That was a long time.

And if he really did like her, then he might have moved in with her as a royal minion when he could. But he chose to continue living with Shiren. Of course, that would have happened only if there were various other factors at play, too.

In conclusion, he didn’t know what he didn’t know.

He suddenly felt someone looking at him.

“Shiren?”

No, it wasn’t Shiren. It wasn’t like there was anyone else in the kitchen anyway.

“I guess I’m tired… Stay calm, stay calm… Cooking comes from the

heart, and an agitated heart will affect the flavor of the food…”

That was mostly true.

“Ryouta, this hamburger is rather sweet.”

“Are you nitpicking my seasoning…? Wow, that is sweet.”

It was embarrassingly so for him.

“Wait, don’t tell me you mistook the sugar for the salt?”

“Hey, that’s a mistake for people who really suck at cooking… But I guess I did.”

He cooled his head as he did the dishes. His concentration had definitely been interrupted as he was thinking. That was the only reason! But conversely, that meant he had been so deep in thought…

If he had stayed in touch with Ouka, then seeing her again surely wouldn’t have left him reeling.

But there had been way too many weird encounters before their reunion. Yeah, all the weird encounters…

Both Tamaki and Alfoncina had drank his blood, he’d made Sasara drink it, he already knew Kiyomizu so she didn’t matter, and he was now living with Shiren.

“Huh…?”

He felt someone’s eyes on him again—Shiren was approaching. She had probably come for some tea.

“Shiren, were you staring at me?”

“What are you talking about?”

“It felt like someone was watching me…”

“Aren’t you just tired?”

“I’m not. It’s your imagination. You need to get back to normal, too.”

They just needed to refresh themselves a bit.

“I’m going to take my bath a little early today.”

“Okay. I have to read the manga Big Sis lent me, so I’ll take a bath later. I really want to read the new volumes of *It’s Me, Basho Matsuo, and I’m Tired of Haiku* and *Elena the Sea Slug*.”

“You still haven’t given them back…? You’re way too into manga, by the way.”

Ryouta decided he was going to take a soak in hot water and refresh his mind.

When he was done washing the dishes, he took his change of clothes

and headed to the bathroom. And Shiren was reading manga on the couch. Did she know she had makeup lessons the next day?

When he entered the changing area before the bath, the first thing he did was lock the door. He had to be careful of these things, since he was living with a girl. After that, he got undressed.

The light in the bathroom was already on. Maybe he'd forgotten to turn it off when he filled the bath earlier. It wasn't very good for the environment, but it wasn't an unusual thing to forget.

"All right, let's get back on track! Tomorrow, I'll go straight to Ouka's without any unnecessary thoughts!"

From here on out, he would do his best to relax. Even if it was just for half an hour, he would pretend to be royalty.

And then he whipped the door open with great gusto—

And there was Alfoncina in the bath, for some reason.

"Oh, I hope you don't mind that I got in before you."

"…I'm confused."

He'd just seen her breasts and a whole lot more, hadn't he? No, everything was covered with bubbles, so he was safe. Yep, he was calling this one safe.

"Oh, I'll let you use it in a moment, so hold on, would you?"

Alfoncina held the showerhead above her to wash herself off.

"Wait! Just wait! Let me explain! Actually wait, why are you in our bathtub? Why are you here, period?"

He would just talk facing the wall for now. He was looking at the wall. Just the wall. Wall, wall, wall.

"Oh, well, I thought Shiren might be at the end of her rope, so I decided I should give her some advice. And I just happened to use the bath (without permission) while I was here."

"Your house is definitely bigger than ours, so why don't you just use your own…?"

"If I hugged you now, she would get mad, wouldn't she?"

"I hope you get excommunicated."

This holy woman was way too wild.

“I’ll just…leave…”

Honestly, this was a tremendous shock. This might even become a source of trauma for him.

“If you suddenly pounced on me and yelled, would she get mad?”

“The whole house would come down, so please stop!”

It goes without saying, but he couldn’t bathe.

Shiren was—as one would expect—reading manga on the couch in the living room.

“Shiren, let me say this again, but you have makeup lessons tomorrow. Get to studying.”

“Studying? …*Pfft*. I might have time to read manga, but I have no time to study.”

“You need to take your life more seriously.”

If she hadn’t been his master, then he probably would’ve knocked her upside the head.

“Well, if you want a real response, I did open my textbooks to check what I didn’t know beforehand but I didn’t know any of it so I didn’t know what parts I didn’t know so I threw my hands up in defeat and I think I almost cried.” Shiren raised both her hands in a casual admission of surrender. “To be honest, I thought I’d understand just a little more. I thought I just wasn’t trying my best and that if I put a little more effort into it, I’d get, like, a sixty or something. But I didn’t even understand ten percent of it.”

Her eyes really were brimming with tears.

“Yeah, I sort of understand how you feel, but all the same, I wonder what you should do… I can’t really say I totally understand what’s going on in class, either…”

It was more like he couldn’t study in an environment like that. Kiyomizu’s face was always right in front of him, he had Ouka and Shiren on either side, and he could feel Sasara’s bloodlust coming from behind him. If he could concentrate under those circumstances, then he could probably reach enlightenment and start a new religion.

“Oh, right, Alfoncina was just here, so why don’t you have her teach you…?”

“Alfoncina is smart, but it’s because she’s so smart that she’s not really good at teaching the hopeless. You know how it goes— Wait, hopeless?! *Me?!*”

“Hey, you’re just defeating yourself!”

Thirty minutes later.

“Phew~. What a lovely bath! Coffee milk just after a bath is simply divine!”

Alfoncina was drinking her coffee-flavored milk in the kitchen, which meant the bath would be open. Ryouta hadn’t bought milk in a bottle like that, so maybe she’d brought it with her just for this moment.

“Then I’ll be heading into the bath. Oh, and please don’t try to come in while I’m in there.”

“Awww~. You don’t trust me?”

She was the type to do something like that with a straight face, so he had to give her a warning.

He could finally take his relaxing bath.

The light was still on in the bathroom. Alfoncina had probably forgotten to turn it off.

“Sheesh, she could have at least turned off the lights. The powerful sure don’t care about the environment at all.”

This electricity bill was coming out of the Fuyukura household wallet, after all. To put it bluntly, it was hard to believe a member of the royal family would be living in relative poverty.

“All right! Now I can finally relax! I’m gonna relax, whether they like it or not!”

And then, when he opened the door—

For some reason, Sasara was washing herself.

“Hmm-hmm~ Lady Ouka~ Lady Ouka~. ♪ We’ll rendezvous till the ends of the earth. ♪ We’ll have our affair at the ends of the universe. ♪ I love you from the bottom of my heart. ♪ Oh, Lady Ouka, mwah, mwah, mwah, mwah, mwah~. ♪”

“Song for Lady Ouka.” Words and lyrics by Sasara Tatsunami.

“Oh, Lady Ouka, mwah, mwah, mwah, mwah, mwah~. ♪ Oh, Shiren, you’re here to bathe with m— What?”

When their eyes met, both Ryouta and Sasara totally froze.

They both felt like they had just seen something they shouldn’t have.

“Wh-why are you…here…?”

“I had something to deliver to Shiren from Lady Ouka (*slap*), so I decided (*wham*) to take a bath while I was here (*squish*).”

* The sound effects were of Sasara beating someone up.

“Don’t beat me up in the middle of a casual conversation! And you keep hitting me straight in my ribs!”

“But I need to knock you out quickly and give you amnesia; otherwise, my purity—”

“Stop! I kind of get how you feel, but you’re turning our bath red!”

In fact, he was doing the opposite of forgetting; he was catching glimpses and peeks here and there while she was whaling on him, so he honestly wanted her to stop moving. He stayed quiet because he thought she might actually kill him if he said anything.

But of course, even though her body was well toned from working as a swordsman, not everything was flat. Well, if he said that, she would definitely say, *Would you rather go to the afterlife or the afterlife? Or would you prefer the afterlife?* so he kept quiet.

“You guys seriously need to bathe in your own homes… Okay, I’m leaving!”

Just as he whirled around, she grabbed his arm from behind.

“Wait just a moment. I have something important we need to discuss.”

“What could you possibly want now…?”

“……Did you see?”

He did. “I didn’t.”

“……You saw, didn’t you?”

He sure did. “I didn’t.”

If he accidentally swapped his inner and outer voices like an idiot, death would be in his immediate future, so he managed to lie about it.

No one had specified *what* he had seen, but he understood what she meant. In a way, they were great communicators.

“Lying will be of no benefit to you.”

“I didn’t.”

“A-answer honestly. You really didn’t see? Like, m-my boobs or anything?”

He’d seen them clear as day. He had no idea she’d have such a great figure. If he told her she looked much slimmer in her clothes, she’d kill him.

“I didn’t.”

“Did you see?”

“I didn’t.”

“You saw, didn’t you?”

“I didn’t.”

“Did you think they were rather on the large side?”

“Yes, I thought they were— No, no, I didn’t see anything!”

“F-fine, I don’t mind. You don’t have to leave. Why don’t you go ahead and use the bath?”

What?

He had expected their argument wouldn’t lead anywhere (well, except maybe the bath), but things took a strange turn at the end there…

“It would be much too rude of me to use someone else’s bath and then chase the owner out of their own house. That would be unacceptable for me as someone of the Tatsunami household. I suppose it’s all right as long as you didn’t see anything. A-and there is something important I need to talk to you about!”

“Oh… That wasn’t about if I saw anything?”

“That is inconsequential! I mean, it is not entirely inconsequential, but we are finished talking about that! We’re moving on to the next topic!”

If she said that much, then he couldn’t ignore her anymore.

He removed his clothes, wrapped a towel around his waist, briefly rinsed himself off, and then soaked in the tub.

But he spent the entire time staring at the tiles.

Sasara said she had something important to talk about, but she just silently washed herself. This was incredibly awkward, and her behavior was making everything even worse.

Just as Ryouta was about to ask what she wanted to talk about, she finally spoke.

“So who is it you like?”

Her straightforward question struck right to the point.

“Well, I really hope that we reach an era where everyone in the world loves one another. I hope war will one day be a thing of the past.”

“Keep joking around and I will stab you.”

“It’s not funny when a knight says it!”

The sound of the shower echoed throughout the bathroom. For a brief moment, he caught a glimpse of silver hair that glinted like a needle.

“I will ask you again. Who is it you like? Well, I suppose you don’t have to say it’s me. But if you do not come to a straight answer on the inside, things won’t go well for you.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“It may lead to a fight between sisters.”

“A…fight…?”

He had a feeling that would happen. Shiren and Ouka had been constantly bickering these past few days.

And he wondered if one of the reasons for that was himself.

“Hey, let me be honest with you. I don’t know if I like anyone. I mean, I’ve only been in this country for a little over two weeks. It’s been, like, ten days since I reunited with Ouka. I’m still just trying to get used to life here…”

There was a pause before Sasara responded.

“I see. Then…does that mean anyone has a chance?”

“If by ‘chance’ you mean ‘a chance with me,’ then yeah, I guess.”

“Oh, I’m entering the bath now, so please move over.”

He was about to protest, but he was too slow.

©Hiroki Ozaki

They were facing away from each other, of course, but their backs were still touching…

"What on Earth are you thinking?"

"Oh, well, I'm not finished talking to you, and if I stay here chatting naked, then I might catch a cold. Oh, let me ask you one more thing, Ryouta Fuyukura."

"Uh, okay, what is it?"

He was insanely nervous with just their backs against each other. Even though the water wasn't that hot, he felt dizzy. It was tough enough to control himself.

"You mentioned that you didn't know who you liked. But what would you do if someone said they liked you?"

"Honestly, I've never thought about it."

He felt an intense desire to kill radiating from her, so he immediately supplemented his reply with an explanation. In other words, an excuse.

"I mean, listen, when I was in Japan, people would tell me they liked me all the time because of the curse… I turned them all down. They only liked me because of the curse, so I could just say sorry without worrying too much about it, and that was that. So that's why I've never seriously thought about it…"

"Now that you mention it, Lady Ouka said something similar to me. But the curse does not affect the people of this country, correct?"

Correct—Kiyomizu aside, everyone in this country was Sacred Blooded, which seemed to neutralize the curse.

"Yeah… I guess in this country, I could finally give serious thought to the idea of a relationship…"

"I see."

He thought he heard Sasara's tone grow just a touch lighter. He might have been imagining it, though.

"I understand how you feel. But either way, please be careful of the dispute between the two sisters. Part of the responsibility will be yours."

That was obvious. If his presence worsened a relationship between sisters who both had Imperial blood, then everything he had done so far would all be for naught.

"I shall be leaving soon. I still have not yet delivered what Lady Ouka sent."

“Do your job *before* getting in the bath.”

“I get so sweaty from walking around in armor! It isn’t easy!”

“Right, I guess we are on castle grounds… You are a part of the Imperial Guard, so I guess you have to wear your uniform, which is your armor…”

“No, I wear it for weight loss.”

“So it’s just a personal goal?!”

He had reevaluated her as a knight devoted to her job, but now he was back at square one.

“Well, if I stay here, it will only cause a misunderstanding, so I will leave promptly.”

“We’ve been at risk of that for twelve minutes now, so just get out of here ASAP.”

What would happen if Shiren came in now?

The commotion and misunderstandings would only increase threefold. There was no way he would be able to bring that situation under control.

And then the door to the bath opened.

It was the worst feeling he’d had all day.

It wasn’t just a feeling—he was certain that things were going to take a turn for the worse.

“Whew… Time to wash all the day’s troubles away!” Shiren came in, towel in hand.

Of course it would be in her hand, but that meant nothing was covering her body…

She didn’t have any underwear on.

She didn’t have a towel around her.

She didn’t have anything on.

“R-R-Ryouta?”

If Ryouta was to accurately express how complicated his state of mind was at the time, it would be like this:

Oh no, what should I do? This is bad enough for me to start reciting my death poem. I should explain why I’m in the bath with Sasara first, huh. And I saw everything, all clear as day. I thought she had no boobs, but I guess… Wait, that’s not the problem here. God, I can’t think about anything, so I’ll just laugh. Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha.

There was the first severe shock since the establishment of the Fuyukura

household.

“Right, okay. So basically, you were sitting back-to-back, just chatting. Right, okay. I bet that was a lot of fun. Right, okay.”

“Please just believe me…”

She had given him a good punch after that. Several times. She had pummeled him plenty of times before he even got the chance to explain himself.

They then moved to the living room, and his trial was underway.

In a corner of the living room, the accused Ryouta and Sasara sat on the floor.

There were stones sitting on Ryouta’s lap—weight stones for pickles, apparently, because Shiren had considered making pickles one day.

“Right, okay. Male and female classmates were in the same bath together, but nothing dirty happened. Right, okay.”

“Erm, I was the one who asked him to. That is why Ryouta is innocent. I am sorry for causing this misunderstanding…”

Sasara must have thought this was bad, since she was behaving unusually modestly.

“And you—if I tell Big Sis that you were trying to create such a scandalous affair, then you will be demoted from Imperial Guard to royal toilet cleaner.”

“I am sorry… I have acted indecently for someone who serves Lady Ouka… Please do not tell her this happened! If she finds out, I might truly be demoted to toilet cleaner! At worst, I may even be relegated to eternally transferring water from bucket A into bucket B, then transferring the water from bucket B back into the empty bucket A!”

“That’s ridiculously pointless! After enough times, that would drive you insane! That’s terrifying!”

“My, Shiren, why don’t we suspend their sentence for now?”

Help finally came from Alfoncina. She hadn’t gone home yet and was apparently still just lounging around.

“Shut up.”

“Boys shy away from girls with short tempers, you know. It’s good that you’re honest with your feelings, though.”

“I said shut up, Matsuko Kimura!” Shiren called Alfoncina by her real name. It was mundane and embarrassing, so Alfoncina wanted to keep it buried.

“Oh! If you’re using my real name, that’s proof that you’re truly angry! Calm down, calm down! I’ll give you a case of the highest-quality tomato juice next time!”

“Hmm, I suppose I have no choice.”

Ryouta’s immediate thought was *What do you mean, you* suppose*?* but things would only get more complicated if he brought it up. He chose to stay quiet.

“Okay, Sasara, show me whatever it is that my big sis asked you to give me. If that satisfies me, then I’ll let you go. If you’re lying, then I will demote you until your job is digging a hole in sand and then filling it up again for eternity.”

“Sure, here it is.”

Sasara brought over a rather large paper bag. It was big enough for someone as small as Kiyomizu to hide in.

It said BLOOD LAKE BOOKSTORE: BOOKS! CDS! DVDS! MENSWEAR! VEGETABLES! MEDICINE!

“That bookstore has too many subdivisions!”

“You don’t have to comment on the mundane. Now bring it out. What’s inside? Books? Or tomatoes?”

Blood Lake Bookstore apparently dealt in both books and vegetables, so she wasn’t joking when she said that.

“In a word, I believe these are most essential to you right now, Shiren. The sun of my heart, Lady Ouka, is so sharp.”

“Tomatoes it is, then.”

If someone needed tomatoes most at a time like this, then that was a problem.

“They are not tomatoes.”

“A fruit tomato, then?”

For a brief moment, Ryouta wondered how Shiren could afford to be so dumb.

“Here is your answer.” Sasara turned the bag upside down.

A mountain of books poured from the inside. They were of different

sizes, but they were all rather big.

"Wow, a mountain of books! How generous of you, Big Sis!"

But when Ryouta looked at their designs, he knew what they were right away.

In a way, they *were* the things that Shiren needed the most right now.

"What kind of books are these? Hmm, there's *Live Coverage of World History*, *Ready Answers for English Vocabulary*, *Math Charts*, *How to Get Five Extra Points on Your Center Exams*, *Classical Japanese for Monkeys*, *First Grade Math Workbook*… There's about thirty of these."

Finally, a message that was apparently from Ouka fluttered out of the bag.

To my dearest and below-average little sister, Shiren—

Study some more. Go through at least two of these before your makeup classes tomorrow.

From the reigning emperor, Ouka

"Yes, this is a big sister's love, yes."

First Grade Math Workbook was probably meant for the youngest kids in elementary school, but if he ignored that particular insult, he could believe she was trying to help Shiren.

"I can't do any of this… I can't do it! I can't do it!" Shiren screamed, like a customer who decided to try out a super-spicy dish and ended up getting angry with the waiter for it. "Waaaaaah! Waaaaaaah! This is a human rights violation!"

"Uh, it hasn't gone that far. You wouldn't buy these books anyway; you should be at least a little grateful for what Ouka's done."

"Grateful? After this act of cruelty, you're telling me to thank her?! I could never do that. I can't use these study books!"

"Don't give up! At least finish the free trial!"

He was honestly impressed with how adamant she was about not studying.

"Well, my work here is done, so I'll take my leave."

While that was all going on, Sasara dashed out of the house. Her warrior's instinct had likely identified the best moment during the

interaction to flee, and she had taken full advantage.

Shiren's own heroic battle began after that.

She started with world history because that subject seemed the least mentally demanding, but she still didn't understand it at all.

Ryouta and Alfoncina did stick around to help her along, at the very least, but she was more clueless than either of them thought, so it took forever.

"Why is Tokugawa Ieyasu establishing the Roman Empire?! Take this seriously!"

"I am being serious! All the foreign names look the same; I can't remember them at all!"

"That's just 'cause they use different writing systems!"

Ryouta started yawning shortly after that. His whole day had been rife with chaos.

"Oh, why don't you go back to your room and sleep, Ryouta? I can take it from here," Alfoncina said.

"I'll do that. I can't be late meeting Ouka."

"Ugh… Right, that's tomorrow…"

For some reason, hearing that Ryouta would be meeting Ouka bothered Shiren.

One hour later.

Studying was much less effective the more time went on. The time that humans could genuinely concentrate was only about thirty minutes. Not even breaking up the time would really help.

"I guess we're near our limit now. And it seems like you're thinking hard, too, Shiren."

"I-I'm not thinking or anything!"

Even though Alfoncina hadn't even hit a nerve, Shiren still got angry and denied it.

Ouka and Ryouta's appointment tomorrow was weighing on her mind.

"I'm not making any more progress for today, so this is fine. But why did you come here anyway, Alfoncina?"

"I just wanted to offer some support. I thought that perhaps the only thing you could focus on was Ryouta and Ouka's meeting tomorrow, you

see…” Alfoncina was always sharp when it came to things like this. “And I brought a necklace specially made by the archbishop just for you.”

A cord had been pulled through a small blue stone. The cord was long enough to fit around her neck.

“I knew I could count on you, Alfoncina. You have great taste.”

“But this also has practical advantages.”

“Practical?”

She had never thought that a necklace could be practical. Maybe it had rejuvenating powers like in an RPG.

“This necklace can curse others by ruining their romance!” Alfoncina cackled like a witch. “By praying to it, the person you want to stay single will absolutely fail in their romantic endeavors. Absolutely.”

She was really emphasizing “absolutely.”

If you looked closely, you might have noticed that her eyes weren’t smiling.

“But there is a side effect. As they say, curses, like chickens, come home to roost—your own romantic prospects will be negatively affected, as well. I suppose you’ll have to choose…”

“This *is* a cursed item…”

“If you want it, I’ll give it to you. Of course, if you don’t want it, then I’ll take it home…”

Without giving it another thought, Shiren practically snatched the necklace from Alfoncina.

“I—I don’t think the side effect will be a problem. I don’t have anyone I want to be romantically involved with! I mean, it’s not like there’s any romance out there I need to stop in the first place anyway!”

“So you don’t want it?”

“Well, I mean, you brought it all this way for me. I graciously accept your gift! It’s a pretty necklace in its own right.”

“Please take it. Of course, it’s up to you whether or not you offer it your prayers. You don’t have to use it for the rest of your life. But having more options gives one peace of mind.”

With that, Alfoncina commented on the late hour and got a ride home in her minion’s car, leaving Shiren alone in the living room.

After staring at the necklace on the table for half an hour—

“Please help me!” Shiren grabbed it and prayed to it. A moment later,

she grew frightened and whirled around.

What if Ryouta had seen her doing that?

It was just a groundless worry. No one else was in there with her.

What a relief.

But why did she wish he had? Why had she hoped he was there to scold her?

And not only that—

She had felt like someone was watching her for a while now.

Maybe that was another one of the necklace's effects…?

THE FIRST CATHEDRAL

The cathedral with the greatest authority in the Sacred Blooded religion, the Holy Church of the Sacred Blood. It is also the home of the highest-ranking member of the Holy Church, Alfoncina XIII. Built by remodeling the Akinomiya Shrine, whose inner shrine and hall of worship were national treasures.

©Hiroki Ozaki

EPISODE 4

LET'S HAVE A TOUR OF THE ROYAL CASTLE!

©Hiroki Ozaki

EPISODE 4

LET'S HAVE A TOUR OF THE ROYAL CASTLE!

"Oh, you actually came fifteen minutes early. You understand good manners."

Ryouta stood waiting at the central gate of the castle at nine fifteen in the morning, and Ouka soon came over.

He went wide-eyed in amazement when he saw her; this visit was off to quite a start.

School was out for the day, so it was a given, but she was wearing an extravagant dress meant just for the emperor.

He didn't think it was for work. It was probably meant for occasions like receiving national guests or something.

When he saw her all dressed up, it reminded him that the two of them were in entirely different leagues.

She oozed elegance from every pore. There was a maturity about her, one that the childish Shiren didn't have. And his first crush was unbelievably beautiful.

If she had told him *You will be my minion* when they were in elementary school, that probably would have decided the rest of his life.

Her personality has a few issues, but she was definitely born to rule…

"Why are you staring off into space? Did you not get enough sleep?"

"Oh, no, I'm fine…"

The moment they met, he grew nervous.

He often saw her at school, but they never had the chance to be alone together.

He wasn't sure how yet, but Ouka was still someone special to him.

"We're going now, then. I'll show you every nook and cranny of this castle, if you know what I mean."

"You don't have to go out of your way to make it sound dirty."

"I'll even give you the passcode for the Earth Destroyer hidden in the

basement.”

“I’ll pass on the traumatizing experience, thanks! And don’t make dangerous things like that! Disarm it now!”

“But when I get stressed, I like to put my hand on the switch and sing, *Oh no, what should I do? Should I flip it?* ♪ It makes me feel better.”

“Stressing you out puts the whole world in danger of being destroyed?!”

After she dropped that bomb (figuratively speaking), they entered the castle.

The entryway was so extravagant, Ryouta shuddered to think how much it cost.

Sure, it was their national symbol, so it was something they should spend their money on, but where did those funds come from?

“Looking at it again, the castle really is impressive…”

“The emperor’s living quarters require the power to make evildoers yield. Well then, I’ll start explaining things bit by bit.”

Ouka first pointed to the staircase.

“There are twelve steps on the stairs during the day, but the intruder alert sounds when you use them at night.”

“I don’t understand why you told me the first part of that sentence!”

“Because I can’t just add *there are thirteen steps at night* as the punchline, so be ready.”

Be ready for what?

“Also, there’s an elevator behind them, you see. We have a maintenance management contract with Sacred Blood Building Tech Services, Inc. It costs sixty-five thousand yen a month. And we have these floors waxed every month by the Sacred Blood Cleaning Services, Ltd., with whom we have a contract—”

“What’s the point of your explanations?! Why are you telling me about your contractors?!”

“Above the gate we just entered, there were carved depictions of *see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil, buy no evil, create no evil, bring in no evil*.”

“At least three of those concepts are nearly impossible to depict with simple drawings.”

“One of those carvings is bringing in the Earth Destroyer, by the way.”

“Please disarm it! As long as you’re emperor, I just know you’ll press it eventually!”

Ouka wasn’t giving him an actual explanation, so all he knew was that the castle was huge, gorgeous, and extravagant.

Ryouta then realized something was off. “Hey, you don’t have any guards or anything. I don’t see Sasara, either.”

Ouka had said she would be showing him around, but he at least thought that Sasara or another Imperial Guard would be tagging along.

“I said I’d be fine on my own today. You have the standing of an Imperial Guard anyway. If I then had more regular guards coming along, that would mean the emperor didn’t trust her own personal guard. That isn’t very good, is it?”

“I see. I guess the emperor needs to think about finer details like that.”

“I love the way he always buys my bullshit.”

“Hmm? Did you say something?”

“No, nothing at all.”

“But Sasara would be the type to ignore what you think and follow along anyway, right?”

“I told her I would take a bath with her someday soon and made her take the day off. She got a nosebleed and said, ‘As you say.’”

“You’re really risking your life, Ouka… Are you okay with that?!”

“Of course. Sasara’s a girl, and I wouldn’t do anything so…… Are you all right?”

Ryouta had apparently gotten scared of Ouka after thinking about her with a cool head.

“I hope you don’t mind my saying this outright, but I think it’s too dangerous to station Sasara near you as your personal guard. With regards to…chastity.”

There were all sorts of things contradictory about a personal guard who was dangerous when dispatched, but it was true for Sasara.

“That is why I have fifteen personal guards. If the situation calls for it, the other fourteen will kill her.”

“You’ve really got your priorities backward!”

“But having Sasara around makes things easier. You don’t often find

subordinates who are so eager to devote themselves to you like she is."

Their master-servant relationship was rather warped.

"Sasara would cry if she heard this… She wouldn't be discouraged, though."

"Ugh, you don't understand anything, do you, Ryouta?" Ouka sighed with an annoyed look. Despite her magnificent outfit, but she was speaking and acting no different from usual. "I will hire people who are naturally willing to put their lives on the line for me, even if that comes with a little risk. When it comes down to it, those are the people I can depend on."

"Wow, you really thought about who you employ."

He was impressed with Ouka. She had control over the things she needed to.

"But still, Ouka, aren't you busy with ruling the country? I hate to say it, but you're using all this time just for me."

"Not to worry. I canceled everything."

"Y-you *canceled* everything?! Isn't that bad for an emperor to do?"

"It's fine. Alfoncina is doing all my work in my place."

Then Ryouta got a text message.

Speak of the devil.

TITLE: help
MESSAGE: I'm going to be crushed by documents. Help me…
\(^o^)/

"She needs help…"

"It's fine. I said it's fine, so it's fine."

"What's your proof?"

"Because I said so, and that means there's not a shadow of a doubt."

I'm sorry, Alfoncina—if you hold a grudge against anyone, it should be Ouka. She said it was fine.

"The castle isn't very interesting, is it? Let's head outside for a bit."

That was all Ouka said before leaving the castle building.

As the one receiving the tour, Ryouta could only obediently follow her.

She'd said "outside," but of course they were still within castle grounds. If they headed straight as far as they could, they'd run into the outer castle walls, but the land area was big enough to fit several Tokyo Domes.

After walking for a bit, they came across what looked like a cabbage patch with a variety of different cabbages.

After passing through the patch, they came across some plants that Ryouta didn't recognize.

"First, here is our vegetable garden."

"I see. I thought it would be."

"Here, we cultivate all sorts of pois— Herbs."

"You were about to say *poisons*, weren't you?!"

"Herbs are very important for assa— The promotion of health."

"You were just about to say *assassination*!"

That was a very sinister slip of the tongue, in his opinion.

"Mm, what a delightful aroma. They are truly excellent herbs, aren't they? They could never be toxic plants. Are you sure you're not impure?"

"What do you call these herbs, by the way?"

"Herbs. Or, because they contain poison similar to habu snake venom, we call them habu herbs."

"So they *are* poisonous!"

"Awww, you fell for it! Habu really is the name of a medicinal herb. This is the poisonous datura."

"So it's still poisonous!"

"Who cares? I won't use it on you, okay?! I'll raise taxes!"

"Why are you getting mad at me?!"

Ouka smacked her fan against her hand; she seemed to be pretty upset.

He didn't get why she would be angry with him for that, but she was generally short-tempered. Maybe she wasn't used to people complaining to her, since she had been raised as a member of the Imperial family.

"Then let's go into the woods over there."

They moved into a dim wood behind the vegetable garden. There was a stone path built through the center of it, intended as a sort of promenade.

"Yeah, it is important to have places where you can be one with nature."

"Yes. The emperor controls not just civilization but nature as well."

"That's not what I meant…"

She was arrogant and feared nothing.

"Shiren acts pretty self-important sometimes, but she's got nothing on you."

At the end of the day, the sisters had a lot in common.

“That is because I *am* important, of course. *Sigh*, it is a crime to be born so great.”

“You need to be careful that you don’t cause a revolt. Whoa, that mushroom’s huge!”

On the outside of the promenade, there was a mushroom sprouting that was about the size of his palm.

“Ah, this cluster of trees also serves as a mushroom nursery.”

“Organic food is good for you— Wait, what kind of mushrooms are you growing?”

“The *Podostroma cornu-damae*.”

Fun Fact

The *Podostroma cornu-damae* is one of the most poisonous mushrooms in the world, with just three grams enough to be a lethal dose.

“There’s no way you’re using that mushroom for anything legal!”

“Taking care of those who oppose me is the same as upholding the law. It’s not a problem. Those who do me wrong will have festering wounds appear all over their bodies and die shortly thereafter.”

Then a shadow passed right by Ryouta.

Upon closer inspection, it was a sneaky-looking person wearing ninja clothes.

The ninja (?) harvested the *Podostroma cornu-damae* and then dashed off somewhere.

“Who was that?”

“I didn’t see anything.” Ouka looked up at the sky in a distinctly unnatural way.

“Hey! That was a ninja! An assassin! Oh yeah, I thought I felt someone looking at me yesterday, too…”

“Listen closely, Ryouta. You can hear the birds singing. Nature is so elegant. And as the one who governs it, I am even more so.”

“You can’t just change the topic by suddenly acting so poetic, and don’t use it as an excuse to compliment yourself.”

He vowed to himself that no matter what happened, he would never go against Ouka.

“Okay, let’s head on to the next stop! Off we go!”

He worried he might see more dangerous things if they kept going this way, so he started in a different direction.

“Oh no! Not that way!” Ouka frantically called out behind him. “**There’s a trap** over there.”

“What?” The moment the word left his mouth, the ground collapsed beneath him.

There were bamboo spears just below his feet… They threatened to impale him… They were going to run right through him…

As he squeezed his eyes shut and braced for impact, he stopped falling.

Ouka was pulling him up single-handedly.

“*Hah*, phew… That was close. You need to be a little more careful now that you’re inside the castle! Let your guard slip, and you’ll die!”

“Man, I’m sorry. I wasn’t— Hey, this isn’t normal! The castle shouldn’t be a place where you can die if you stop paying attention!”

“Of course it should be. Castles are meant to have pools of lava and endless loops, and the last thing waiting for you should be a monster that breathes fire and throws axes. Didn’t you know that?”

“I’m not really happy to hear that you based it on that video game world with the little mustachioed man!”

“Goodness, this is what happens when you stop following me and wander off on your own. Ignoring me is virtually rebellion. Now that you’ve done that, I should just let you fall on the spears.”

“Can you even relax in such a dangerous castle?”

He was still dangling above the spears during this whole conversation, by the way.

“And, erm, this is a little embarrassing, since you just saved me, but could you pull me up a little more…?”

He was barely hanging on by keeping his feet pressed against the walls of the pit, but if Ouka let go of his hand, he would be done for. The bamboo spears would run him right through.

“Indeed. This means your life is in my hands, doesn’t it?” Ouka smiled seductively, as though realizing something.

Her smile gave him a chill.

This might be a very bad situation…

“*Siiigh*, my hand has gotten tired. I don’t think I can hold on

anymore…”

“Please! Your Majesty!”

“Was it a golden Ryouta you dropped? Or a silver Ryouta? Or a bronze Ryouta? Or an orichalcum Ryouta? Or a stainless steel—”

“I don’t care about those little jokes of yours; help me!”

Right, if he had to define Ouka as either a masochist or a sadist, she was a Sadist with a huge capital S. In bold.

She was pushing him right to the edge.

“Ryouta, did you know about the law that states that your tax will be increased tenfold if you touch the emperor for over ten seconds? We call it the Tenfold Tax Increase If Anyone Touches the Emperor for Over Ten Seconds Act.”

“You just made that up! You definitely just made that up!”

“You know about the suspension bridge effect, don’t you?”

Ouka awkwardly turned her gaze away from Ryouta as she spoke.

The suspension bridge effect: mistaking the restlessness and nervousness of crossing a rickety suspension bridge for romantic feelings toward anyone else there.

But why was she bringing that up now?

Maybe she was buying time with small talk to torture him.

“D-don’t you feel it? Like, don’t you feel butterflies in your stomach?”

“We don’t have time for this!” Ryouta yelled; his life was on the line!

“…Well, I guess you’re right.” With a slightly bored expression, Ouka sighed. “Fine, I’ll help you. But, Ryouta, I have a small bit of bad news for you.”

“It doesn’t matter what it is—just tell me.”

“My arm fell asleep…”

“Do what you can! Just do what you can, Your Majesty!”

Now that she mentioned it, he felt like he was starting to see a hint of exhaustion in her face…

“The ninja took the *Podostroma cornu-damae* home; this was truly awful timing.”

“I knew it was a ninja! And why do you have ninjas in this country anyway? Whatever, that doesn’t matter right now!”

“I haven’t put the head ninja on watch over the Fuyukura household; what is the meaning of this…?”

“So they *were* watching me yesterday!”

“Hmm, it’ll work itself out. Instead, promise me one thing.”

“Wh-what is it?”

“You will do one thing that I ask of you.”

It was a frightening promise for something so simple.

But he couldn’t refuse. It was like coming to *Yes* or *No* options in an RPG—you always go with *Yes* anyway.

“Fine. But I’m not going to accept killing people or anything else inhumane.”

“That’s fine. I’m not planning to use you for anything so unreasonable.”

Ouka’s grip on him finally strengthened, and Ryouta at last returned to solid ground.

“Now that we’ve made our promise, let us return to the castle,” Ouka said, dusting off her dress.

“I’m sorry—you got all dirty because of me…”

He’d bumbled and soiled a dress that probably cost around what the average adult earned over the course of several years. He felt responsible.

“It’s fine. It was worth it, in a way.”

Ouka walked on ahead, smiling dauntlessly.

“I’ll cash in that promise at just the right time.”

They went back to the castle again. It was way too dangerous to look around the garden anymore.

This time, they went up to the second floor.

“You probably have all kinds of different rooms because this is a castle, right? I’m okay if you just show them to me one by one.”

“Sheesh, you sure have a lot of requests for a tour I’m taking you on. Fine, fine. Here are the servants’ quarters. The maids, you might call them.”

“Wait, you have maids? Color me intrigued.”

Even though Ryouta was on the serving side, he found his heart pounding loudly at the word *maid*.

“My, I can see the lust in your eyes. Very well. I’ll allow you a look.”

He pulled the door back, and before him was something like a judo

training gym.

Not only that, but the maids were fighting (?) with brooms, yelling, “Ha!” “Ya!” “Dash it!” “Ora-ora-ora-ora-ora-ora-ora-ora-ora!”

“This is not what I was expecting!”

“Maids must be able to defeat five to ten insolent individuals at once in order to be acceptable. That is why they’re training like this. By the way, everyone here is a ranked kendo expert.”

“They’re not very docile at all.” At least it was good for public security.

“Oh, are maids not supposed to let their fists do the talking?”

“I don’t know how you arrived at that conclusion, but no.”

“Then why don’t we head to the kitchen next?”

Just as the name suggested, he could already smell something good wafting from it.

“For lunch today, we will be having minestrone soup, a side dish of tomatoes and pork with a Japanese-style sauce, tomato pot-au-feu, and the main dish will be a basil and tomato spaghetti.”

“I could offer a comeback, but I’m not gonna.”

He had plenty of experience with tomato dishes because of Shiren, so he was a little sick of them.

“But you’ll be eating plenty of it later.”

All the Sacred Blooded loved tomatoes, apparently.

“Gah, I should be happy thinking about a full-course tomato meal, but I just can’t!”

“Careless snacking is strictly forbidden, by the way. You might die.”

“Who is it you’re trying to kill, seriously?!”

“When you live a long life, you need to think about assassination sometimes. You need to be ready for when that happens.”

“No, I don’t, really.”

The next room they came to was different from all the rest; it was especially solemn.

“This is the prayer room for the Imperial family. We pray to the goddess of the Holy Church of the Sacred Blood here.”

“Whoa, it’s like a European cathedral in here…”

Stained glass windows stretched around it; it was almost magical. But even though Alfoncina’s First Cathedral retained the Japanese architecture of the remodeled Akinomiya Shrine, he wasn’t sure what to say about it. He

would just keep quiet.

“You could say this room has one of the holiest atmospheres in the whole castle, second only to my room. Every Sunday, all the people in the castle gather to pray to our deity.”

A statue of a winged goddess stood quietly in the center of the room.

It was the statue he’d seen in Alfoncina’s First Cathedral. It was the deity of the Holy Church of the Sacred Blood, called the Goddess of Blood. Her bat-like wings were lifelike and captivating.

And this statue was much more impressive than the one in the First Cathedral.

Most would say it was anatomically impossible for humans to grow wings from their backs, but it was beautiful enough to laugh in the face of that rule.

“It sure is a masterpiece in here… I almost feel compelled to start worshipping, myself.”

“It is a sanctuary, after all. There’s no point unless everything around you reminds you to fear the divine. And there’s no point if we don’t get a lot of alms.”

“You don’t have to talk about money at a time like this!”

There were times when she was less like an emperor and more like a manager.

But even when she broke the mood, the idol of the Goddess of Blood was still beautiful.

Or maybe it seemed even more so because he was looking at an awakened Shiren.

“Hey, Ouka, can you transform?”

“Into Ultraman?”

“Why on Earth do you think I asked you that question?! I’m talking about that transformed state you guys have! That one with the wings!”

“I can’t tell you, Ryouta.”

Ouka lowered her lashes sadly. She looked like she was praying.

“Listen, the Goddess of Blood is not a mere benevolent deity. She is also a deity of destruction and evil. That’s why simply praying to her will not always bring you fortune.”

“That’s kind of complicated…”

“It’s not at all. Alfoncina is telling you about the teachings of our faith,

is she not?”

“To be honest, she’s taught me almost nothing.” It felt like she was just playing with him the whole time.

“Ha-ha! That’s so like her.” Ouka laughed with an innocent smile.

He didn’t even know she could smile like that. It was probably because she and Alfoncina were old friends. Perhaps even best friends.

And that laugh completely stole his heart.

He already knew it, but Ouka was genuinely adorable.

“Hmm? Is something wrong?”

“Oh, it’s nothing…”

There was no way that he could say he was lost in admiration for her.

“Well then, I shall be giving you a personal lecture about the Sacred Blooded faith. Free of charge, because I am generous.” She walked toward the front of the statue and then whirled around. “The Goddess of Blood was originally one of the countless gods that existed in Japan. Just like the others, she was self-serving and inevitable.”

©Hiroki Ozaki

“Wait, I typically think of gods as being more just. Even Japanese gods like Amaterasu and Hachiman and Inari Okami and Okuninushi are all fair…”

“Those gods were born much later. There was a very fine line between gods and evil spirits among Japan’s original gods; most of them were a selfish bunch, cursing humans at the smallest slight. People built shrines and worshipped the gods so they wouldn’t lash out at them. The people of ancient times had much less control over nature and sickness than people do today. They recognized all those things as works of the gods, didn’t they?”

In short, that meant the old gods were born out of fear of nature.

“That’s why I believe that the Goddess of Blood was also a being who the humans recognized as a god out of fear of the Sacred Blooded. But because the Sacred Blooded themselves were ostracized, the humans forgot about the Goddess of Blood. Until we found her and lauded her as the highest power. That is why she also has a vengeful personality.”

“Sure, now it seems more like a neutral thing rather than the justice that Shiren talks about…”

When Shiren had been awakened, she was just trying to defeat her enemy Sasara, not necessarily meting out justice.

“That’s why the Holy Church of the Sacred Blood is a surprisingly delicate thing. Do you understand now?”

“Yeah, I do. There’s a lot I need to learn about the Sacred Blooded. I do serve you, after all.”

For a brief moment, Ouka’s face went red.

“Y-you’re right. Being an Imperial Guard requires a certain caliber of education. You will serve me to your greatest capacity!”

“Yeah, I know. I know we’re inside the castle, but it’s gorgeous in here. There’s not a speck of dust anywhere. Wait…what’s that?”

Something sat in a corner of the chapel.

There was a stack of old newspapers and magazines, tied up with string.

“This is also a storage room.”

“You have no intention of following the state religion, do you?! And those magazines look like pornos to me!”

“Oh, hey, Ryouta, you there? I was throwing those out; you want them?”

“This is blasphemous! And don’t buy porno mags!”

“I didn’t. I get sample copies of every book published in the Empire.”

“You’re abusing your privileges as emperor…”

For some reason, he now saw the Imperial castle as a stupidly huge house a rich friend just happened to live in.

But part of him also thought that maybe it was better this way.

“Hey, I’m relieved that we can talk like we used to in elementary school.”

To be frank, Ryouta had thought that they wouldn’t be able to have any more casual conversations, since Ouka was now emperor.

“You really are slow. That’s why I called you out here.”

Ouka gave an annoyed sigh. It was something she often did when she was in a bad mood.

“You’re in such a humble position, I knew you wouldn’t be very happy if I treated you to the highest-quality court banquet or anything like that, right? You’d prefer something from when we were kids, like eating corn chowder *Umaibo* with your tummy sticking out, or rejoicing after running around the forest with a bug-catching net and finding a beetle, or getting excited after pulling a foil card in Carddass, or crying because you were never good at swiping the bar codes in Barcode Battler and the machine couldn’t read them, or being shocked at seeing the first *Gundam* in real time, or hanging out in a rental library to read all the manga you can, or plugging your nose to drink the gross fat-free milk that came with school lunch, right?”

“You’ve got your generations all mixed up! And you’re being way too detailed!” But it was true that he would prefer the energy from their childhood. “Yep. I’m glad to know that you’re no different from how you were in elementary school.”

“Of course I am. I was born perfect, so there’s no need to change or hide it.”

“Yep, haven’t changed at all…”

Now that they had seen practically everything on this floor, all they had left was the one room at the end of the hall.

“I guess that’ll be our last stop. It’s so far away from everything else.”

He walked toward the room at the end of the hall. Ouka’s expression transformed dramatically.

“No! That’s not part of the public area!”

“The room’s obviously not going to kill me, right? Or maybe it

might…? But you would have tricked me earlier if you were going to.”

“It’s not a trap. But you ca—”

He had already opened the door by the time she said it wasn’t a trap. As long as it wasn’t going to kill him immediately, it was probably fine.

Before him stood pink walls.

There was also a bed with a canopy, and there were teddy bears all over the bed—it was obviously a dainty room.

A school uniform hung from the wall, so it was the private bedroom of someone.

There was even a spot for taking off one’s shoes, as though to advise any visitors that there were no shoes allowed here.

“Hey, is this your room, Ouka?”

He didn’t think there would be very many high schoolers in the castle.

“No need to guess—it *is* my room! Now hurry up and get out!”

“It’s surprisingly cute that you have stuffed animals on your bed. It doesn’t match your character, though.”

“I don’t need your critique; just hurry up and get out! You’re not allowed to look!” Ouka ran at him to pull him away.

Her face was bright red, her typical calm nowhere to be seen.

This was an invasion of privacy. He had to go back.

But something on the desk suddenly caught his eye.

It was a picture frame. In it was a picture of Ouka, probably from elementary school. Of course—it was her room. She was the same as she always was. But who was it in the picture next to her?

“Hey, is that…me?”

He picked it up and looked at it. The boy in the picture sure did look like him.

“Don’t look! Don’t! Get out! I’ll rip you to shreds! Give that back!”

Ouka quickly grew even more flustered. She entered the room and reached out toward Ryouta.

“Give the photo back! Give it!”

“I get it—calm down! Watch out! You have long nails, Ouka!”

“At least give it to me while you speak nonsense! Don’t look at that photo for another second!”

“Don’t push me! You’re gonna knock me over—stop!”

As they argued, Ouka tripped on Ryouta’s leg.

Ouka's center of gravity tilted toward Ryouta.

"Oh, Ryouta, I'm going to fall. I'm falling!"

"Okay, you've told me about it, but what are you gonna *do* about it?!"

"O-obviously, you're not going to stand there idly; you're going to help me!"

"Huh? Oh, you want me to support you so you don't fall."

"You'll fall, too, so make sure you have good footing! It would be humiliating for me to collapse onto the floor!"

"I see. You've always had a ruler's mind-set even before you became the emperor; that's why it seemed like nothing chan— You're going way too fast! I can't keep you up!"

In the end, Ouka just ended up pinning Ryouta down.

Ryouta fell straight backward with Ouka on top of him.

But there had barely been any impact.

If he remembered correctly, there should've been a bed right where they were.

Wait, a bed…?

To put it simply, Ryouta was sandwiched between Ouka and the bed.

Wait…this was really bad.

This meant he was being pinned to the bed in his female classmate's room. Morally and ethically, this was bad. No, even before he could consider ethics, if anyone found out he was doing this with the emperor, he would be sent to his death.

"Oof… Oh, we fell onto the bed. I guess neither of us is hurt, so…"

He could hear Ouka's voice coming from his stomach. She seemed to have fallen on his chest, but she hadn't grasped the situation yet.

"Um, Ouka? Could you move…? This is dangerous…"

Anyone could easily get the wrong idea about this situation.

This was the emperor's room. The bed was an extravagantly beautiful one with a canopy…

"I—I know… But this dress is stiff…"

She wriggled on top of him.

Stop, that's making it worse.

"Ohhh, we're sinking. I just *had* to order a fluffy bed, didn't I…? It's so hard to get up…"

Ouka was putting up a desperate fight—right on top of Ryouta.

Various parts of her body were touching him. This was not good, not at all.

"Hey, why is there something hard…? Ew! I can't believe you!"

Ouka sounded disgusted. His only relief was that he couldn't clearly see her face.

"I know; I'm sorry. But wouldn't it be even weirder if someone wasn't excited about this at all?"

He could smell really expensive perfume. He couldn't know if it was high-quality by smell alone, but it had to be. It was the kind of scent that would seize commoners with fear.

He regretted ever thinking about Ouka romantically. There was no way they could be well suited for each other. They were worlds apart. It was like an ant falling in love with a tiger.

He wanted to run straight to the border. *Just let me go.*

"Hey, Ryouta."

Ouka leaned in close and stopped.

He wasn't sure why she decided to stop there.

Their faces, and their lips, were mere inches apart.

"What is it…?"

"What would you do if I told you I loved you here and now?"

"…"

"……"

"……Don't say stuff like that; you're not going to anyway."

"…Yeah, you're right! It was just a bad joke."

They both laughed to avoid the silence. They had to, lest the situation take a turn for the worse. It almost felt like that Destroyer thingamajig had been activated inside him.

Ouka finally stood up.

"It's almost time for lunch. Time sure does pass quickly, doesn't it?" Three hours had flown by in an instant. "Why don't we take a walk to my favorite place to finish off the tour? Come along." Ouka nonchalantly took Ryouta's hand.

Her hands were delicate and slender, like they would crumble away if he squeezed them.

"Whoa… It's fine. I can walk myself…"

He was extremely aware of everything around her because of what had

just happened.

"I am the emperor. I can at least escort my guests. It is royal etiquette!"

"…Ouka."

"What."

"Aren't you walking a little too fast?"

"Rulers should be more relaxed, yes. Indeed, it is as you say."

Ouka made a short, deep breath.

"Well then, let us go."

This time, they went to a proper garden—at least, one without any dangerous mushrooms.

There was a tiny brook running through the middle and a small Western-style bridge over it.

"This is the castle's rear garden. You can see how everything beyond here is natural forest, yes?"

Just as she said, a mountain suddenly sprouted up at the back end of the garden. It was less of a mountain and more of a sheer cliffside. The garden was right at the bottom of the cliff.

"This mountain leads straight to the city of Oshiro in Japan. You could probably get there if you took the risk to climb up. We'd find you right away and pull you down, though."

"Isn't this kind of dangerous? I mean, security-wise? What if the Self-Defense Force attacks from above?"

A little scared, Ryouta looked up the cliff.

"If they surprise attacked us from this cliff, they'd just fall to their deaths. We also have security personnel up top anyway. Ever since Kiyomizu Jouryuuji infiltrated, we've strengthened security across the rest of our borders. And we have been on high alert with Sasara as well, so we have eyes on everything."

"What's the point of an Imperial Guard under security just as tight as the border…?"

"It's so no more scoundrels will ever find their way in here again."

When she put it that way, she was probably right.

But Ouka didn't seem as bold as she had been just a little while ago. In fact, she was almost nervous, stumbling along with less grace than before.

“Ouka, are you hurt anywhere? You’re acting weird,” he said, ignoring how she had pushed him down.

“Don’t worry about it… More importantly, I just mentioned how no scoundrels will come in, right?”

“Yeah, I heard you.”

“So I ordered everyone who was in the garden to leave. We’re the only two here, Ryouta.”

“Yeah, no way that’s safe…”

“It’s just for ten minutes.”

By the time he realized it, Ouka had taken him to the very bottom of the cliff.

It was the end of the garden. When he looked up, the cliffside reached high into the heavens.

Ouka then turned around to look at him.

There was a shade of melancholy hidden somewhere behind her eyes.

“Hey, Shiren is just a temporary master to you and nothing more, right?”

“W-well, yeah…”

He found himself a little embarrassed when she said “more,” but of course there was nothing there to be ashamed of.

“So even if you can’t be my minion, it’s not a problem if you act as one of my personal guard, right?”

“I mean, you already gave me a sword, so sure.”

He hadn’t returned the sword that Ouka had given him. So according to the rules, he was now one of the Imperial Guard.

“I gave it to you informally, but we haven’t held a ceremony of appointment yet. I was thinking that maybe we could do that now.”

He’d learned about this in world history—rites where someone shows their loyalty to the king and then is officially appointed as a knight, and stuff like that.

“But I don’t know how the ceremony of appointment works.”

“I do. It’s fine; it’ll be over in an instant.” Ouka gracefully held out her right hand. “Ryouta, I hereby recognize you as a member of the Imperial Guard. As proof of your appointment…kiss…my hand.”

For a moment, time stopped.

“Huh? Hey, wait a sec…”

This was much too dramatic. Ryouta unconsciously took a step

backward.

Even though it was just her hand, how could he kiss his first crush?

"Why are you making this weird?! This is typical for a knight's ceremony; it's just a ritual!"

"Sure, it might be normal for a ceremony…"

"Didn't I say…you would have to do one thing that I asked of you…?"

Even though it was supposed to be an order, Ouka's face was beet red.

Yeah, the promise he had made just as he was about to be impaled by the bamboo spears.

"Are you sure about this? Don't regret your choice."

"Of course I won't! Now hurry up!"

"Wait, what does that mean…?"

Ouka was so impatient that her Imperial dignity was nowhere to be seen. "That's because the emperor never goes back on her word. I'd fail as a ruler if I regretted everything I said! So hurry up and kiss me!"

Kissing Ouka.

Kissing his first crush.

Breathe in, breathe out. Breathe in, breathe out.

Ryouta was trying to calm his pounding heart. But there was no way he could reach a state of euphoria or a state of zen. All the blood was rushing to his head.

Oh, whatever. He couldn't keep her waiting any longer.

"Okay, I'm doing this, Ouka…"

"You've kept me waiting too long, idiot."

And just as his face neared her hand—

————————*Bwoooooom!!!*

He heard the dull sound of something falling.

Someone landed right beside them, probably from the top of the cliff.

"Ahhh! Trouble, there's trouble! Call an ambulance! Or is this an enemy attack?!"

Now was no time for kissing; their concentration had completely shifted to whatever fell. But was it just an accident? The Self-Defense Force Special Ops coming in to attack them wasn't completely out of the question.

"Unbelievable! How unlucky can we be to have this happen *now*?!"

"Now's not the time to get angry! Hey, are you okay? Are you alive?"

Ryouta immediately dashed toward the victim.

“Ohhh… Am I going to die…? What a short life I lived…”

Judging by the voice, the one who fell was a young woman. She sounded weak from her injuries.

She was talking about dying, but at least she was still conscious. She wasn’t dead, and that was what mattered.

“Just hang on! Keep your spirits up!”

“If this was going to happen, then I should have just climbed Mount Tenpo in the winter…”

“Wait, you know that’s the lowest mountain in all of Japan, right?! Don’t talk like it’s Mount Everest!”

“If this was going to happen, then I wanted to cross a twenty-five-meter pool on a yacht…”

“Just getting the yacht into the pool is trouble enough! Don’t talk like you’re crossing the Pacific!”

“I wanted to see a visionary ancient culture…in Nara…”

“You can just go by train or by car or whatever!”

“I wanted to unite the world…in a video game.”

“Just do what you want.”

She was talking a lot, so she was probably fine.

“Ohhh, I don’t think I have much time left… I’m seeing visions of Ryou… Is this heaven? It has to be. I worked so hard; I never bossed my bosses around…”

Wait, Ryouta had heard this voice before…

He knew exactly who it was.

He hadn’t recognized it right away, but his brain had apparently rejected logic and reason.

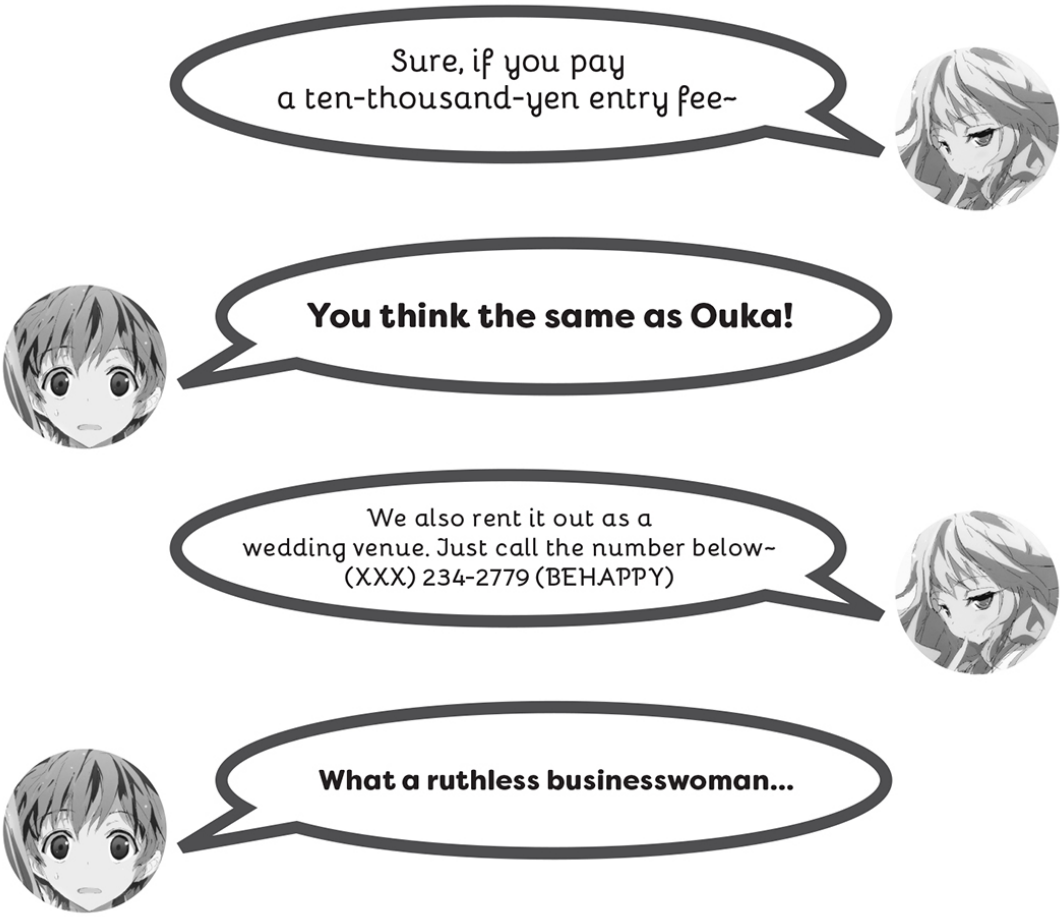
“Wait, no way! Rei?”

“Wait, no way! Ryou?”

He looked closer to see that this woman was his older sister, Rei Asagiri.

You Call That Service? Q&A

■ Question for Alfoncina
I would like to have a tour of the First Cathedral. Would that be possible?



©Hiroki Ozaki

EPISODE 5

LET'S CHAT WITH REI
FOR THE FIRST TIME IN FOREVER!

©Hiroki Ozaki

EPISODE 5

LET'S CHAT WITH REI FOR THE FIRST TIME IN FOREVER!

"Urghhh…… Ngh…… Ooh……"

They first carried Rei, Ryouta's older sister, to the castle's infirmary.

Her arms and legs were wrapped in bandages, and she was groaning.

There appeared to be another bandage on her head, but it was just a large ribbon.

That ribbon had acted as a cushion for her. It wasn't for fashion; it was like a makeshift helmet to protect her head.

Either that or she was using it to feel taller because she was so short.

"Ooooh… Ryou, just…leave it…to me… I can take a couple hundred of these small fries by myself…"

"*Crunch, crunch*, she's so delirious, it's like she's on the verge of death. Is she okay? *Crunch, crunch*," Ouka said, munching on some crackers next to Ryouta.

It didn't seem like she was in a good mood.

"She's weirdly tenacious; don't worry about it. Also, don't snack in the sickroom."

"It's fine. I don't think she'll die. She just talks a lot."

"You're not wrong, but… Rei was always the type to get sick easily. She is tough, though."

It sounded contradictory, but that described her pretty well.

"She would always get really sick or severely injured, and she always ends up in coughing fits because of a weird chronic illness, but she recovers unusually quickly."

"Huh, there sure are weird people in the world."

"From what I know, she's fallen from the deck at Kiyomizu Temple twice (as in, she went to Kiyomizu Temple in Kyoto twice and fell from it each time), fell from Tokyo Tower once (it is unknown how she managed to

reach a place she could fall from), and she's also fallen from Inuyama Castle, Hikone Castle, Matsumoto Castle, and the Himeji Castle tower. When she fell from Inuyama Castle, she even fell into the Kiso River at its base and got picked up by a cormorant fishing."

"So she's fallen from all the castles designated as national treasures, I see. She has the makings of a ruler."

Her experiences in fact did nothing to qualify her as a ruler, but either way, a normal person would be dead by now.

"But this is a mystery."

"What is? How she's still alive?"

"Well, I guess that is a mystery, and that is the biggest question in the grand scheme of things, but—why is she here?"

To state the obvious, Rei Asagiri was Japanese.

To state the obvious again, this was Sacred Blood Empire territory.

Why *was* she here?

Rei's eyes then went wide. "*Gasp!* Here!"

"Rei, you came to! What on Earth happened?"

"Oh, Ryou, it's such a long story, *ahem, ahem*!" Rei began to talk feebly. "Well, *cough, cough*, I was so worried—*ahem!*—when I noticed that you weren't coming home. And then—*cough!*—I heard a rumor that—*ohom, ohom, ohom!*—you were here in this—*ahom, ahom!*—country. And so I came in through that mountain—*ahem!*—and reached the back of the castle—*cough, cough!*—and then saw that there wasn't any place for me to get down. But then my chronic cough—*koff, koff, koff! Koff, koff!*—started up and the momentum carried me—*ehem, ehem!*—off my feet and down the cliff."

"Your cough kept interrupting you, but I got the gist of what happened."

Her real coughs and her story coughs were all jumbled together in her story, so it was hard to tell which was which. It was like a test question—A or B?

"And when my feet slipped, I rumbled and tumbled all the way down the hill…"

©Hiroki O

zaki

“Don’t make it sound like a cute nursery rhyme.”

The sound of her falling was probably more like *nyoooom, SPLAT!*

“But still, you recover way too quickly. It’s a miracle that you’re alive at all.”

“Well, I dreamed that there was a river at the far end of a flower garden. Everyone was so happy, waving at me from the other side. Everyone was wearing black robes and held large scythes in their hands. It looked like so much fun, I decided to go, but I realized, *Oh, I can’t swim*, so I pulled back. And then I woke up.”

“And if you could swim, then you’d be dead…”

Those friendly people with the scythes were probably grim reapers.

“But I’m so happy I found you safe and sound, Ryou!”

Rei hugged him as he sat next to the bed. She just reached out and wrapped her arms around him.

He was glad she could move around, but he was a little embarrassed.

“Rei, stop!”

“But I’m so happy I finally managed to see my little brother! Now let’s get back to Japa— *Eek!*”

Rei had hugged him with a big smile on her face, but it was suddenly painted over with fear, as if she had come across a bear in the mountains. In case you were wondering, Rei had encountered bears on five separate occasions in the mountains and had been bitten four of those times.

“Wh-wh…? Y-y-you’re…”

Before her was Ouka, an intense glare directed her way.

If there had been a poster of her in front of the police station, it would definitely have been the kind of expression that would make others think she was a criminal.

“Greetings. I am the emperor of the Sacred Blood Empire, Ouka Sarano. We welcome you to our country, elder sister of Ryouta. To think you would fall from the cliff into the back garden; I was so certain there was no one else around, ha. Ha. Ha.”

Her speech was polite, but even Ryouta could feel the negative aura around her.

“However, our country has no diplomatic relations with Japan, so we may have to punish you for illegal entry… What do you have to say for yourself?”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry! I won’t do it again!”

Rei immediately started bowing to Ouka.

That was a sudden establishment of a hierarchical relationship.

“Well, no matter. Ryouta also came in illegally, so I will pardon you. Think of it as a small consolation.”

“For what?” asked Ryouta.

“Well, if it was another girl like Kiyomizu Jouryuuji who said she loved you, then chaos would descend over your entire life, including at school. **But your sister would never do anything like that**, so you’re safe.” Ouka nodded deeply before continuing. “There’s no way an elder sister would find her blood-related younger brother romantically attractive or anything perverted like that. **There is no way people so twisted could ever exist**.”

Rei offered a strained smile.

“Y-yes, indeed. I could never love my younger brother as a man. Much less desire anything else immoral like sleeping together with him in the same bed; taking a bath with him would just be like snow in midsummer, and wanting to kiss him is just as unscientific as walking naked on the surface of the sun, *ehem, ehem, ehem, ehem, ehem, ehem*!”

Rei abruptly started choking.

“Oh yeah, don’t you have this thing where you start coughing when you lie—? Ow!”

She suddenly smacked him across the face.

“Don’t say that; she might misunderstand! That makes it sound like I’m so in love with you that I would start lying! Like I came to this country because I could scarcely stand being away from you for another second! Like my head is so full of thoughts of you during work that I lose documents, and then I have to write a formal letter of apology! You are the least interesting person to me in the entire world!”

Oh no. She was serious.

Rei always had the tendency to blurt out everything she was thinking.

She thought she hadn’t been found out yet, but…

Well, she was apparently planning on controlling herself, so she probably wouldn’t do anything extreme…probably.

“But I’m glad I somehow got in. What a happy ending.”

Rei’s expression immediately brightened.

She had a natural baby face that often caused others to mistake her for a

high school student, and she was rather attractive. A boy would tell her he was crushing on her almost once a month in middle and high school.

At present, she was twenty-three and (probably) single.

"What are you glad about?"

"See, you don't have any relatives in this country, and I'm sure you were sad all by yourself, Ryou. And so I'll take care of you until we can get back to Japan. Oh, what a happy ending! And I know you aren't a shameless, wanton boy who would be living with another girl in her house or anything. *Ehem*. ♪"

Why was that cough so cute?

Ryouta's nerves tensed. He had to handle this well; otherwise, there would be a bloodbath.

Now that he thought about it, Rei had always detested anything that was warped.

To put in perspective how much she hated it, even though she could wholly understand questions about the area of polygons, she had no idea when it came to circles; she was typically in first place when it came to short-distance runs in a straight line, but with a curve in the route, she would be unable to turn completely and that would be game over for her.

She was working as a civil servant, and she had been hired because her workplace appreciated how straightforward she was.

He could force his mouth open, but he could never say that he was living together with a high school girl.

And if he said he had become the servant of said high school girl, he would soon be covered in blood.

"Rei, just calm down and listen. Let me explain, and you'll understand. I think all of humanity can achieve common understanding."

"What's that collar, by the way?"

He had a bad feeling in his gut. She knew everything, didn't she?

"I put this on to help me understand how cats and dogs and other pets feel. Our brothers are not just humanity. All of animal-kind are our brothers and sisters. That's why I wear the collar. This should be a given for humans of the global age in the twenty-first century."

"Wooow! That's lovely, Ryou! How noble-minded you are! I am so proud of you!" Rei Asagiri was the pure type. "Yes, I think you're doing

just what people should obviously be doing. But if you said good morning to all the plants you saw on your way to school, you would be late. Perhaps that's too much?"

When she said it herself, Ryouta was starting to hate it more and more. People like that were gross.

"Oh, what a relief. I honestly thought you were wearing it in order to display your submission to a girl, Ryou. I'm glad I didn't jump to any conclusions. Phew!" Ouka patted Rei on the shoulder. "What is it? Are we restructuring? I'm a public official, though… Oh, Your Majesty, you're not my boss."

"Er, Miss, actually…" Ouka whispered into Rei's ear. *"Spspspspsps, spspspsps, spspspsppss, ssppsps."*

A minute later, Rei's eyes began to water—and she burst out into tears.

"Waaaaah! You're a delinquent now, Ryou! You're a *Ryo*ngdoer! You're living with a girl! *Cough, cough!*"

"Well, I'm impressed. She might be crying, but she's right."

"Now's not the time to be impressed! What should we do? Rei's sobbing like a crybaby!"

"But I just told her the truth, that you were living with someone else. No embellishment at all." Ouka was acting suspiciously triumphant over this.

He thought he heard a voice whispering, "Make use of everything and everyone," but he was probably imagining it. Ouka was definitely the kind of person to say something like that.

"Miss, please don't get the wrong impression. It's all right; the two aren't romantically involved."

For some reason, Ouka offered her support.

But Ryouta had known her long enough to know that wouldn't be enough to give him peace of mind.

"R-really? I…suppose that's all right…"

"Yes, Ryouta is only serving a girl of the same age. As proof, see, there's even a bell here. It's almost like a strange fetish, isn't it?"

She had honestly betrayed his expectations with that unnecessary addition.

"*Ehem, ehem, ehem!* No! You must be severely kinky to serve someone else and wear a collar! Those are for the more advanced! I cannot recommend it for beginners!"

It was over.

"I cannot allow this! You will be going home to Japan right now! I will transfer you to an all-boys boarding school deep in the mountains so you may never again talk to girls! I'll do it—you hear me? I will!"

Now came the talks of forced repatriation…

But—

"I'm sorry; that won't be possible, Miss," Ouka interjected again. "Our country has no diplomatic relations with Japan. Because of that, I cannot allow Ryouta—nor you, of course—to return. I would happily receive you as a guest, but please do understand."

"Whaaat?! I can't take off from work without permission—I'll be fired! *Ahem, ahem, ahem, ahem!*"

"You're an adult who's more worried about her work now, Rei?!"

But it seemed like his forced repatriation was over now. *Nice one, Ouka.*

That didn't mean this whole situation had been settled, though.

"Then I will live with you! I will re-temper your weak spirit! *Ehem, ehem!*"

"Indeed. It is natural for an elder sister to live with her younger brother. :)" Ouka grinned with satisfaction.

Ryouta knew that he had no right to deny this arrangement.

Meanwhile, elsewhere…

Work, necklace, work…

Shiren sat through her makeup lesson while feverishly clutching the necklace.

The teacher was surprised to see this, too. Had anyone ever seen Shiren Fuyukura look so serious before? Well, probably not. She was always sleeping during class anyway, so no one could see her face.

"Fuyukura, you sure are serious today. If you kept that up during cla—"

"Silence! I cannot have my concentration (on this curse) interrupted!"

"You're right, Fuyukura. I'm sorry. I'm sure you'll have no problems improving your grades!"

The teacher was impressed, albeit for the wrong reasons, but Shiren was barely paying any attention to the review.

This is Big Sis we're talking about, so she's definitely taking full

advantage of her power with her alone time with him… This'll get really bad if the curse doesn't work… I mean, I don't really care who Ryouta becomes good friends with, but if he forgets that he's my minion, that would be a problem… My duty as a master is to manage my minion… Right, that's my duty as a master.

Now that she thought about it, she didn't know when the tour of the castle was supposed to end.

What if he says it's going to take until nighttime and he doesn't come back…? Obviously, he can be friends with whoever he wants, but minions have to be faithful and pure. If he's wandering around outside, blatantly ignoring curfew, then that would be a flagrant corruption of public morals, and I would need to discipline him.

She then realized something important.

Crap, I didn't give him a curfew.

Since she had not considered the possibility that her minion might go off somewhere on his own, she had never gone out of her way to sit him down and talk to him about being home by six or seven on the dot.

I need to pick one fast, or else he'll think he can be out until ten or midnight. That's not okay! Not okay at all! But is it a little too tyrannical if I decide a curfew on my own without talking to him? That's not very democratic, is it? I couldn't suddenly ask him to come home because it's dinnertime…

She definitely had to make some sort of decision. But decisions took a lot of physical strength and courage.

Shiren didn't have quite enough courage for it.

If I suddenly set up a curfew, wouldn't he just get all grumpy? Wouldn't he hate me…? He is my minion, so I should just have him serve me. But I don't want to be served by someone who hates me.

She secretly opened up *My First Minion* under her desk.

She read the chapter about minions being good partners.

Minions are completely different than slaves. The bonds between a master and their minion's hearts form the foundation of the job. One could say that love between master and minion is required. If a master never thinks of their minion, then it would be the same as operating a machine,

and they should be ashamed. Heck, even people who are attached to their machines show them care.

Not thinking about one's minion was a disqualifier for being a master.

Let's worry about the curfew later. I'll trust Ryouta's free will…

"If only I could be in makeup lessons forever! If only time would never pass!" Shiren found herself screaming in the middle of class.

"Wow! Fuyukura! Your eyes have been opened! I'm so happy! Let's have another special class again next week!"

This misunderstanding had led to an odd sense of trust between Shiren and the teacher.

But time wouldn't stop, and the makeup lesson ended right on time in the evening.

Around this time, Ryouta would be in the middle of preparing dinner. That meant he would probably be home now.

I wonder if he's actually home…

This was probably the first time in her life she was scared to check her texts. That fear wouldn't change anything, but she still felt it all the same.

She grasped the necklace one more time before looking at her phone.

It was a cursed necklace designed to ruin the romance of others.

We're in the twenty-first century. This is just a superstition. It has to be; otherwise, people who get Your partner is coming soon *in their fortunes would all end up happily ever after. So I'm not really doing anything wrong.*

And she had been told that, for how much misfortune she brought to the romance of others, her romance would be equally plagued with misfortune.

That's just because this whole necklace business is a superstition, so it doesn't matter… No need to worry.

And then, after she silently thought to herself, she looked at her messages.

TITLE: Home
MESSAGE: I'm home. For various reasons, the castle tour ended just before noon. Come home as soon as you can. I need to talk to you ASAP.

"Ohhh! Gracious necklace!"

She unconsciously struck a pose of renewed conviction, and her pigtails bobbed up and down.

"Before noon? That's pretty early. Early enough to make me think there must have been some kind of trouble. And what does this mean?"

The text said, "Come home as soon as you can. I need to talk to you ASAP."

Of course she was coming back; why did he write it like that?

Or maybe he just wants to see me that badly?

There were probably minions out there in the world who could barely stand to be away from their masters. Maybe that was it. It had to be. Ryouta must have finally realized her benevolence.

"Well, next time I'll just have to put a five-hundred-sacred-yen coin into the donation box at Alfoncina's cathedral."

Shiren walked the long road home from school with a big smile on her face. It was the worst kind of Saturday, full of review, but at least it ended on a high note.

She was in such a good mood that she bought extra-concentrated tomato juice from a vending machine on the way home. It was thick, like potage soup, and it went down great.

She rarely ever used the vending machines on the way home. If she bought something every day, then the costs would add up. She typically waited until she got home, summer aside, but she could probably make an exception just for today.

Maybe she should take her review seriously next time. It was embarrassing to have such bad grades, and she didn't want her weekends to be taken up by makeup classes.

She arrived at the back entrance of the castle grounds. She bowed her head and greeted the guard at the gate, then hoofed it home. After a five-minute walk across the spacious grounds, the antiquated house entered her line of sight.

Ryouta was waiting for her there. She flung open the door.

"I'm home! Ryouta, how was your tour of the castle toda— Ah?"

A pair of women's shoes that she had never seen before sat at the entrance.

Had someone come over to visit? Maybe once Ouka was done with the tour, she'd come here. Maybe she'd come to check on her and make sure the study books were actually being used.

But they weren't Ouka's shoes. They weren't Tamaki's or Alfoncina's, either. They didn't seem like they would belong to Kiyomizu. They were grown-up shoes with heels.

And beside them were smaller sneakers. They were covered in dirt, like they'd been through the mountains. What was going on?

"Oh, Shiren, you're back. I need to talk to you."

Ryouta appeared in the entrance hall with a meek look.

"What is going on?"

She hadn't seen him this serious since their fight with Sasara and Kiyomizu. It made her completely forget about the shoes at the door.

Now that she thought back on it, he had written in his message that he wanted to see her (loose interpretation), so maybe it was related.

Maybe this is some momentous confession? No, wait, it's wrong to let those feelings bud between master and minion…

"Why are you smiling, Shiren?"

"Huh? I-it's nothing! Class just went really well!"

"Really? That's great." There was no heart in his response at all. "Okay, come in."

She followed Ryouta into the living room.

I mean, it's never going to happen, but maybe there will be a marriage registration form on the table or maybe a ring… Wait, no, that can't be it. Oh, maybe those shoes are a present for me? That could be possible…

Standing there in the living room was a woman she'd never seen before.

There was a massive ribbon on her head. Maybe that was her true form, and the female body was just being controlled.

"Who's this…?"

The woman politely bowed her head. "It's nice to meet you—*ehem, ehem*!"

She suddenly choked. Maybe she was prone to illness.

"I am Ryouta's elder sister, Rei Asagiri. I would like to foster a happy home environment among all of us. To be direct, I will be living with you in this house starting today!"

"Whaaat?! Your big sister? Living with us? This is *weird*!"

“You two are the weird ones! I cannot allow two high schoolers to live together in such an inappropriate fashion!”

Rei took both her index fingers and pointed them at Shiren and Ryouta.

Because of the angle, it looked like she was making some questionable transformation pose.

“It’s not inappropriate at all! Ryouta and I are living a very healthy lifestyle! Say that to Alfoncina or Sasara instead!”

She’s not going to know who they are, but yeah, you’re exactly right, Ryouta thought.

“Healthy? It cannot possibly be healthy when he’s wearing this collar!” Rei shook her finger at Ryouta, emphasizing her point.

“Th-that’s to show that he’s a minion… Either way, he is my minion, so it’s not a problem! Silence!” Things were getting worse for her, so Shiren yelled. “You may be his older sister, but Ryouta and I are bound by our deep ties as master and minion. You do not fulfill the conditions of *authorized personnel* in this *authorized personnel only* zone! And why are you here in the Empire anyway?! I’ll call the police on suspicion of illegal entry!”

This isn’t gonna end well, Ryouta thought.

Then—

“Waaah! She’s being mean!” Rei started crying and hitting Shiren. “I’m right! I’m just! I’m logical!”

“Ow! Don’t hit me! Ryouta, is your sister a baby?!”

“I’m not a baby! I’m a public servant of the city of Oshiro!”

“Then go publicly serve the city of Oshiro! You can’t go to work while you’re here!”

“When I contacted them saying I was in the Empire and couldn’t go back, they said I could take off!”

Guess they just didn’t care that much.

“A-anyway! I’m watching over Ryou to make sure he doesn’t do any bad things! I’ll keep an eye on him from the top of his head to the inside of his boxers!”

“Don’t look there, Rei!”

She almost successfully took advantage of the confusion to intrude on his privacy.

“You don’t need to do that! Ryouta’s entirely wholesome! I know

everything about him, from the backs of his heels to the tips of his toes, so I know I'm right!"

"I'm telling you, your scales are always too small! Do you have a foot fetish or something?!"

With both of them saying such ridiculous things, he could hardly keep up.

Rei then gave the final, finishing word.

"Oh, I also have permission to stay here."

"From who? I'm not going to let you even if Ryouta said it's okay. This is my—"

"From the emperor."

Fwip.

Rei unfolded a piece of A4 paper with both her hands.

It was like she was presenting a paper that said *CASE WON* before a courthouse.

PERMIT OF LIVELIHOOD

Miss Rei Asagiri

We hereby allow the person named above to have a livelihood within the territory of the Sacred Blood Empire. Additionally, we grant permission for the person named above to live in the same house of any relatives he or she may have. Additionally, any person whose name starts with S, followed by H, followed by I, followed by R, followed by E, and ending in N must not oppose this decree. In the case of opposition, this individual must participate in a five-hour review of Japanese, English, math, science, and social studies every day.

Penned by
Emperor of the Sacred Blood Empire
Imperial Year 1

"I—I cannot allow this! I cannot allow such an unreasonable rule! If she thinks she can do anything she wants, she's sorely mistaken! I'm going to call the court!"

Shiren flipped through the phone book, found the Court Help Line, and called it.

With such a small population, the country's services were set up in a flexible way and were quite convenient.

"Hello, this is the Court Help Line."

"I am Shiren, the younger sister of the emperor. Actually, after this and that—"

"Our apologies, but it is the law that the emperor resolves any conflict among the Imperial family, since it is a highly sensitive political matter. We cannot intervene."

And they hung up. Shiren fell flat on the couch.

"Big Sis, you idiot!"

Shiren's eyes dropped to the necklace around her neck.

Now that she thought about it, Alfoncina had said:

"But there is a side effect. As they say, curses, like chickens, come home to roost—your own romantic prospects will be negatively affected, as well. I suppose you'll have to choose…"

The side effect of the curse had come.

It wasn't a rival in romance, but it wasn't good news.

©Hiroki Ozaki

“Ryouta, I’m tired, so I’m going to rest a bit in my room. Call me when food’s ready.”

With a tired look on her face, Shiren started on the way back to her room. People sometimes found themselves wanting alone time, and that’s the sort of mental state she was in. Her shoulders also felt rather stiff.

Just as she was about to go up the stairs, someone pulled on her arm.

“Wh-wh-whoa! I’m gonna fall!” She managed to steady herself and turned around to find Rei. “What are you doing…? Are you planning on killing me and making it look like an accident…?”

“I would never. As my grandpa used to say, ‘Even the worst people—’”

“Have some good in them?”

“‘— ’s murderers are still criminals.’”

“Your gramps was a realist!”

“And that’s why we should always make sure to leave no evidence. No one can scientifically prove anyone prayed to a cursed item, so it’s okay.”

“What kind of person was this guy? Oh, some kind of otherworldly…?”

Rumor had it that less than half the people who interacted with Grandpa Asagiri recognized him as human on first meeting.

Because of that, he had absolutely no luck in the romance department, stayed unmarried for a very long time, and cast a curse on his future lineage so that at least his grandchildren would be attractive.

It was thanks to that curse that Ryouta was extremely attractive to human women and often found himself in trouble, so he’d escaped to the Empire.

“Then does that mean you had lots of guys after you in Japan, too, Rei?”

“Not as much as Ryou. I guess I had someone tell me they liked me at least once a month. I’d say I was more attractive to ghosts.”

“That’s just a regular curse!”

“Oh, we’re getting off topic. More importantly, here.” Rei handed her a ladle and long cooking chopsticks. “We’re starting on dinner now, and you’re helping, too. The emperor asked me to train you.”

“I leave all that stuff to my minion, Ryouta! If anyone is doing any serving, it has to be him—”

“Going against me is going against Her Majesty. Your minion will be confiscated.” Rei was ready and willing to use her authority.

“You’re a coward for abusing state authority like that…”

“I am a public servant, so I’m used to relying on authority. Tee-hee.”

“Why are you acting proud of that?!”

“But see, you can also think of it this way. *Ehem.*” Rei whispered into Shiren’s ear as she coughed. *“Ehem, ehem.”*

“I can only hear you coughing.”

“Don’t you want to show off your cooking ability to Ryouta?”

For just a second, Shiren’s mind moved at light speed to make a decision.

Was it finally time to show her minion what she could do…? Was it?

It wasn’t as if she didn’t feel bad about making him cook every day, and in this day and age, it was best if both men and women could cook.

Ouka was the emperor, so she probably never made any food on her own. Maybe learning how to do something Ouka couldn’t would give her an edge.

“Fine. I’ll do it. But I can only cook traditional Sacred Blooded dishes, okay?”

“Such as?”

“I’ll make meat and potato stew, an omelet, and salt-fried mackerel today!”

“Wow, it’s almost like typical Japanese home cooking!”

“Ryouta doesn’t hate anything except when it comes to putting blood in things, so there’s no problem.”

And so the two went to the kitchen to start cooking.

Ryouta was already in the kitchen making broth for the miso soup.

“Ryouta, we’re cooking today. Move.”

“Wait, why, all of a sudden?”

“Because. We’ll be working here. Master’s orders!”

“I am extremely nervous, but okay.”

Ryouta went back to his room on the second floor with a distressed look.

“Now let me show you the best kind of Sacred Blooded food. First, the meat and potato stew.”

“I wonder if it’s any different from what we have in Japan. *Ehem.*”

“Watch closely. ① Make the meat and potato stew.”

Shiren finished that part of the dish rather quickly. She was pretty good at it.

“My, you’re much better at cooking than I thought.”

“② Add tomatoes and tomato juice on top of the freshly made meat and potatoes. Done!”

A frightening-looking meat and potato stew sat finished before them.

“Next, the Sacred Blooded omelet. ① Make the omelet. ② Place the omelet in a pot full of tomato juice. Done!”

There was an eerie hue to this dish, too.

“And the trick to making it especially delicious is to add as much tomato juice as possible. It will bring out the original flavors of the juice.”

“Ooh. This is quite ethnic.”

“Next, Sacred Blooded salt-fried mackerel. ① Make the salt-fried mackerel. ② Drizzle plenty of tomato juice on top, and done!”

As Shiren cooked, Rei spent most of the time coughing next to her.

She was, without a doubt, someone who should not have been in the kitchen.

“Mm. You certainly are somewhat skilled.” Rei patted Shiren on the shoulder. “But you still have a ways to go.”

“What? You’re not going to tell me not to use tomato juice, are you?”

When she had made lunch for Ryouta before, she’d used less tomatoes (with much heartbreak), but she wasn’t going to compromise this time.

“Not *enough* tomato.”

“Oh, i-is that so…?”

Rei produced a plastic bottle of tomato juice. “We must fill it to the brim. So that it hides the omelet.”

Rei Asagiri was sickly.

That was why her sense of taste was broken.

And soon, it was dinnertime.

Ryouta covered his eyes.

“I knew this would happen.”

Rei had given Shiren some advice, too.

Rei herself had no sense of taste. She was constantly sick in some way or another, so she only ever ate rice porridge or other things without any flavor.

“Come now—your master has so kindly made this for you, so you should eat it.”

Ryouta first tried the omelet. “Everything only tastes like tomato. Well, I mean, the omelet is fine, but this mackerel is not okay.”

Ryouta picked at his food and reluctantly took tiny bites into his mouth.

This was a whole waste of tomato. Someone who could happily eat whatever without any regard for flavors would always do something like this. Like putting anything they wanted in their curry or putting mayonnaise on everything. How dare they treat cooking so lightly.

“You don’t seem very happy at all…”

“I appreciate the effort, but you really need to be more sensitive to delicate flavors.”

Oh, I was way off the mark…, Shiren thought.

She had thought he would be a little more thankful, but it looked like he just hated it all. And since he was treating it like a collaboration between Rei and herself, the pride she should have felt in making something herself was dwindling.

This was all because Ouka had dragged in this Rei girl, and the whole situation was just getting worse. Was this one of the effects of the curse, too?

“Okay, Ryou, say ahhh…”

Rei brought her chopsticks closer to Ryouta—putting it that way made it sound like she was going to poke his eyes out, but she was just trying to get him to eat the mackerel.

“Rei, this is embarrassing.”

“Well, it would be if I did this during class, but she’s the only one here. As long as she doesn’t take a video and post it anywhere, we’ll be fine. Remember? I fed you every day.”

“She fed you every day?!” Shiren recoiled slightly. For a brother and sister, that was more than just getting along.

“Yeah… Since I was the one who cooked everything, she said she’d be the one to feed me…”

“Come now. Open your mouth…”

“Fine. Ah.” Ryouta opened his mouth in defeat.

“Ehem, ehem.”

“Don’t cough when I have my mouth open, Rei.”

“Sorry, sorry. Let me try again. Say ahhh…”

Her chopsticks went in his mouth. Shiren wanted this nightmare to end

as soon as possible.

"Okay, another bite now, ahhh…"

"Come on! No more! You won't finish all your food at this pace!"

"I think this is totally fine. It's intimacy between brother and sister. Now have an omelet. Ahhh…"

Shiren was about to say that she was the one who had made the omelet as the main dish, but she decided not to. She had a feeling they would just think she was narrow-minded.

Rei ended up chopstick-feeding Ryouta a total of thirty times.

I really need to do something about this, and soon…

The thought cemented in Shiren's mind.

Ryouta wanted the exact same thing.

"Oh, Ryou, I'm finished with the bath. It's your turn now."

Rei, steam still rising from her head, came into the living room.

"Okay, I'll go now, then." Ryouta headed to the bath after her.

He had to do something about this.

As he removed his clothes, Ryouta imagined his future. He couldn't have Rei stay here like this. It was clear that Shiren was going to snap very soon.

I'm still impressed you found your way here, Rei.

Since Ryouta was innately attractive to humans, he often went to the mountains, away from people, and he knew a thing or two about climbing.

The paths going up the mountain behind the castle must have been pretty steep. A route for higher-level hikers, one could say. Even though it was ultimately for illegal entry, was it really something an amateur could try?

Something just wasn't sitting right with him.

I could ask her directly, but I can already imagine what would happen…

"Rei, are you hiding something?"

"Wha—! I would never do something so terrible. Let me just be honest with you. Actually, ehem, ehem, ehem, ehem, ehem, ehem, ehem, ehem, ehem, ehem, ehem*, you see. Do you understand?*

…Or something like that.

As long as she had that cough, he would never hear the truth.

He could mull over everything, including that stuff, once he got into the bath.

Ryouta had the habit of getting lost in thought while he was in the bath. The bath, brushing his teeth, and sitting on the toilet were his three greatest modes of inspiration.

"But I can't go in defenseless…"

He checked to see if there were any discarded clothes around. Both Shiren and Rei were done for the day, so there should be no risk of intrusion. But it was entirely possible that a guest he wasn't expecting was inside, so he had to stay on guard.

He still had to be doubly sure, however. He made a call with his phone.

It was to Tamaki. Calling Kiyomizu with his own phone would bring about all sorts of other risks, so he couldn't do that.

"Oh, hello. This is Tamaki. May I help you?"

"What are you up to now, Shijou?"

"My uncle came to borrow money again, so he and my dad are fighting. I'm watching quietly from the sidelines. Oh no! They threw a beer bottle my way!"

"Oh, if you're at home, then that's fine. Sorry."

He was a little concerned about her home environment, but he decided not to pry.

Now that he was insured, he opened the bath door with a clatter.

"Oh, Ryouta dearest, would you please rinse off my back?!"

And there was Kiyomizu in the bathroom, a towel wrapped around her.

"…Where the hell did you come in from?"

"I snuck in through the window!"

"Why?"

"I was hoping to slip into your bed as you slept."

He threw her right back out the window.

"How can you accomplish anything at this rate?! I will not let you sleep the whole night!"

It sounded a little indecent out of context, but Rei had decided it was study time.

"Dammit! I go through one study book, but then there's just another

waiting for me!”

Shiren was on the verge of tears in the living room.

She hadn’t decided to start studying or anything commendable like that; Rei was forcing her to study.

There was a bandanna around Rei’s head that read VICTORY. Anyone could find those at a hundred-yen store, which was probably where she had found hers.

“Her Majesty told me to give you a Spartan study session. We’re taking things rough!”

“Big Sis… You’re awful… Why are you bullying me…?”

“Oh? Her Majesty said this was to keep the promise she made with you long ago.” Rei suddenly stared off into the distance.

“What promise?”

Shiren would have met Ouka when they were both young, but had they made some kind of promise?

“Yes. You might have forgotten already but…it was to study and get into Tokyo University together.”

“That’s definitely fake! She read that in a manga somewhere!”

“I was so touched when I heard how Her Majesty felt. I will send you to Todai, and that’s a promise! Even though you don’t have diplomatic relations with Japan yet.”

“Hey! That’s kind of a huge problem at the end!”

“Her Majesty said, ‘I know it’s tough for my younger sister. But I want her to go to Tokyo University, even if she hates me. I believe this is how I can show my love to her as her older sister. Despite the nonexistent relationship between our nations, I still believe that anything can be accomplished with love.’”

“Love isn’t going to get me into that school! No way that’s possible, even if she’s just saying what she thinks sounds cool!”

“She said ‘Todai or Die.’”

“She thinks she’s being clever!” Shiren honestly thought this was hell.

Maybe she was getting all this extra nagging because she was now officially recognized as Ouka’s younger sister.

This wasn’t supposed to happen.

She wished their positions were different and they could get along as

siblings.

But maybe that wasn't possible. On top of everything else, they were both fighting over a shared goal. Ouka was probably aiming to use all this review as an excuse to pull her apart from Ryouta.

In that case, she didn't need her big sis anymore. She took the necklace off and squeezed it tight.

If you're going to cheat to get in my way, then you should just go away, Big Sis.

She didn't actually hate her, but her big sister was driving her a little nuts at the moment.

Just a little.

"Hmm? Does the pendant on that necklace light up?"

"Huh? I don't know…" She looked at the necklace, but it was normal.

"I see, I see. I must have imagined it. It seemed like it glowed for a moment." That was odd. "Oh, it's almost time for me to report your state of progress to Her Majesty." Rei looked at her watch.

"Can't you just do that over the phone?"

"No, of course not. I must retrieve the new study materials, of course."

"Whaaaat! There's more?! She's a demon! A devil!"

"And since you'll get three new books every day, you'll have to up your pace; otherwise, you'll never finish. *Ehem, ehem.*"

Shiren could feel herself crumbling to ash. She collapsed face-first onto the table.

"I'm starting to understand how people feel when they're in debt to a loan shark…"

"Well, I'll be back. Keep studying while I'm gone. And don't do anything weird to Ryou. Even in the worst case, no *ehem, ehem, ehem*! Nothing more erotic than that!"

"You're covering up all the embarrassing parts with your cough!"

If Rei refused to say it in front of others, Shiren could somewhat imagine what it might be, but she really wanted to know for sure.

"Th-that's…*ehem, ehem, ehem!*…obvious! Don't make me say it again!"

"That's what I'm saying: What is that *ehem, ehem, ehem!* part?! You don't want to say it, do you?!"

"I know we're both girls here, but it's still much too inappropriate. First,

you *ehem, ehem, ehem*, then you gently touch *ehem, ehem, ehem*… And then slowly *ehem, ehem, ehem, ehem, ehem, ehem*! Oh, I'm so embarrassed! How will I ever get married now?!"

"You're just doing this on purpose! That little cough of yours is omnipotent! There must be some kind of invisible force at play here!"

For a brief second, Rei's expression darkened.

"An invisible force… Don't tell me—can you see it?"

"How can I see an invisible force?"

"Oh, well, hee-hee. I'll be going, then." Rei opened the window and stepped straight outside.

"Use the door! Are you a ninja?!"

"Oh, it's just a habit from work…*ehem*."

"What kind of work?!"

Rei gave a final cough and then left.

"Phew, I guess I can rest now… Buuut you're still here, aren't you?"

Kiyomizu had stolen Shiren's spot on the couch, reading some kind of book—probably a manga from Shiren's room.

"You're a nuisance, Kiyomizu."

There were some days when Kiyomizu would just appear out of nowhere, and today was one of them. She was like a mosquito that somehow flew into the house, so it was only after she was inside that they noticed her. Even if they locked the doors, she would still find her way in.

"I am waiting for Ryouta. I have no choice but to be a nuisance."

If she was doing this even when she knew she was bothering them, there was no chance for her to change her ways.

She was a pain, but she fit in so naturally there, it seemed kind of silly to just chase her out. There were no signs she was suddenly going to try and take Shiren's life, either.

"You're at least better than Ryouta's big sister. You're not getting in the way."

"I think that's rather obvious. Please do not liken me to dangerous individuals such as Rei Asagiri."

"'Dangerous individuals'? But she's his big sister; she's not going to try and surprise him while he's in bed or anything (probably), right?"

"What are you talking about? When I say 'dangerous,' I mean it more in

a life-threatening sense," Kiyomizu breezily clarified.

Shiren couldn't ignore that. "Why would she threaten his life? Isn't she just a public servant? She's Ryouta's older sister."

"Yes, she is a public servant. She is being sustained by the tax money from the people of Oshiro."

"Then she can't be dangerous. She's annoying, though."

"While she might be a public servant, she is a part of Oshiro's Special Measures Division."

That wasn't a phrase Shiren had heard before. "What's the Special Measures Division?"

"They are an entity that secretly deals with problems when the government doesn't want to handle them publicly. I know them well, since they are birds of the same feather as we are. They are like living ninjas."

Shiren's hand curled into a fist around the necklace. A small, faint crack ran through the pendant.

"And Rei Asagiri is the division chief. That means she is the leader of the shadows of Oshiro. I cannot imagine what sort of dangerous life she's lived to become the leader at such a young age. She's like a real-life Steven Seagal."

"No, no, no. Rei's sickly, and she's always coughing…"

Anyone could fake something like that.

Would someone doing secret work come out and say that they could accomplish superhuman feats, though?

Why was someone from the "dark side" of society here, then? She had just been in this room.

Was she after Shiren? That couldn't be.

She'd had several opportunities when they were alone, like when they were cooking. Even though Kiyomizu had been there when Rei was tutoring her, she still had a million chances.

So if not her, then who?

"Wh-why does someone so dangerous have to come here to the Empire?" she asked. The answer was already inside her, but Shiren was too scared to acknowledge it.

"I thought I already told you. Rei Asagiri is from Oshiro, a city directly on the border with the Empire. If people attacking humans lived right next door, you know what due course would be."

She had fallen from the cliff when Ryouta and Ouka were walking through the garden.

It was like she was trying to attack Ouka.

"I'm…a huge idiot!"

She clenched her fist, much harder than she had before.

The pendant in her hand shattered to bits.

It wasn't an accident—Shiren had done it intentionally, as punishment to herself for being such a fool.

"Oh goodness, what are you doing? Please don't hurt yourself! You're bleeding from some of the shards! I will lend you a special remedy!"

"Sorry, but I don't have time for that. I'm going out for a bit." Shiren dashed out of the house.

She was going to the castle.

To Ouka—to her big sister.

She didn't know if the curse actually existed.

But the thought had crossed her mind.

You should just go away, Big Sis.

She should have been happy to finally be acknowledged as Ouka's little sister.

Of course she didn't want her to go away.

But this wasn't the end. She would put a stop to this. She *had* to.

"Wait for me, Big Sis."

She exited the house and circled around to the back, then searched for the perfect weapon in their storage area.

All she could find was a plastic bat.

She at least wanted a wooden sword, but this was an emergency. She would have to make do.

"I'll beat that assassin's face to a pulp."

Shiren dashed through the castle grounds, her single plastic bat in hand.

FRESHMART WARAKIA

A small general grocery store in the
Sacred Blood Empire.
In addition to vegetables, meat, fish, and deli fare,
they also carry fresh blood.

©Hiroki Ozaki

EPISODE 6

LET'S SAVE BIG SIS!

©Hiroki Ozaki

EPISODE 6

LET'S SAVE BIG SIS!

Sitting in the bath, Ryouta thought about the future.

"I guess I should send Rei home."

Yes, he was making his family worry, and yes, he had no real choice but to apologize for that, but Rei living with them was obviously hard on Shiren. He would struggle to come up with why exactly it made him feel sorry for her, but it was like the Asagiri family was taking over her household.

As the one who lived with her, Ryouta felt like Shiren was full of shortcomings.

She was arrogant, and she'd driven him up the wall more than once or twice. She often poked him in the eyes, among other acts of violence. She never studied, and she wasn't very bright.

But she had finally been recognized as a member of the Imperial family and made up with her older sister, Ouka.

That last part was a little hard to see, though…

With Rei in the mix, the situation was spiraling toward a catastrophe that would destroy everything they had.

He could explain all that to others without embarrassment, but he had more reasons, too. Specifically, that if the situation continued in this direction, his spirit might just break.

After Kiyomizu, Rei was the second person who had come in from Japan. If people were coming in for him at this pace, he would suffer a nervous breakdown, no question. He had to set a precedent for his own safety, even if it would be unpleasant.

"I'm gonna do it! I'm going to tell Rei straight up that I'm okay and that she should go home. And that Miss Public Servant needs to do her job."

Speaking of, he really wasn't sure what Rei even did at her job. It was unusual for the word *public* to feel as empty as it did. Maybe she only

worked for as much tax as she was paid.

"I may as well ask. It's worth knowing what kind of job my sister has."

When he marched into the living room, however, it was empty.

"Huh. Maybe everyone went to bed. All the study books are out, though."

He couldn't wake them if they were sleeping, so Ryouta decided he would just call it a day.

When he was about to slip into bed, he found Kiyomizu already there.

"Now, Ryouta, my dearest, let us—"

"Oh, it's you." He tossed her out of the room and locked the door. He would get straight to sleep.

"Wait, what?! What a cruel way to react to my presence! 'Oh, it's you'—you're not even surprised! I would prefer more of an over-the-top reaction, even if you do detest me!"

She was screeching from the other side of the door, so he unlocked it.

"Let me tell you something: People get used to things. And if I was surprised by all your attacks every single time, I'd pass out from anxiety. And Rei's just making everything worse by being here… Oh yeah, Kiyomizu, did Rei and Shiren go to bed? It's really quiet."

It was *too* quiet, and that didn't sit right with him. Well, more specifically, it was strange that having the two of them together wasn't summoning some sort of trouble.

"Oh, your sister said she was headed to see the emperor and left. And then Shiren chased after her."

"To see Ouka? Why, at this time of night…?"

"I can't speak for your sister, but I suspect Shiren chased after her once I told her what your sister's job entails."

Kiyomizu still didn't use Rei's first name, even in front of Ryouta.

"Her job? Why do you know that?"

It was probably clerical work or something like that, so why would Shiren react like that?

"I suppose it's not your fault if you don't know. Your sister is the chief of Oshiro's Special Measures Division. It would only cause chaos if this division was known to the public, so I suppose that's why she kept quiet."

"What kind of work does the Special Measures Division do…?"

It sounded terrifying from the name alone. At the very least, they were

Special because they were taking Measures against things that weren't normal.

"To put it simply, her job is to fight with society's underground organizations. Trouble will only find its way to you if I say too much, so I won't say any more."

"That's what you were doing as a public servant, Rei?!"

This was a surprise. He totally thought she was a regular woman, albeit a little airheaded.

"At the very least, she has the stealth appropriate for her job. A regular person would never be able to get into the Empire with its security on high alert! Because of Sasara and me, there are no gaps for even an ant to enter the country! If she truly was a random civilian, then there was no way she would have been able to get into the garden behind the castle!"

"So what you're saying is that Rei came here, targeting Ouka…and Shiren's chasing after her…"

How did it get *this* bad?

"Gah! Why does this crap always happen to us?!"

In the two weeks since coming to the Empire, he'd ended up in these tight spots time and time again. Compared to this, life in Japan had been far more peaceful. But now was not the time to grumble.

"Kiyomizu, I am a part of the Empire."

"Unfortunately, yes."

"Officially, I am Shiren's minion…"

Which meant he had to protect Shiren.

"…and Ouka's personal guard."

Which meant he had to protect Ouka.

And the enemy was one of his relatives.

He had completely forgotten since becoming a part of the Sacred Blood Empire—many humans out there treated people who drank blood as monsters. The peace had made him forget. He really wanted to punch himself until he remembered never to let down his guard again.

"Kiyomizu, I have a special job for you."

"A sexy job?"

"Keep an eye on things to make sure no other suspicious people find their way in here. It's possible that someone else besides my sister is here. I'm going to go stop her."

“What? Why?”

“I don’t want one of my relatives to hurt anyone!”

It was about a ten-minute walk to the castle.

It was nighttime, so security at the gates would be tighter than it usually was during the day, but he had something special for this.

It was the sword Ouka had presented to him. As long as he had it, the gatekeepers had to let him pass with just a glance.

But if he caught up to Shiren before then, things would only get more complicated.

“I feel like my life’s gotten a lot bloodier since moving to this country…”

Still, it would be much better to stop this now, as little more than an awkward memory.

There was still time to leave this incident as a story they could laugh about later.

He wouldn’t let a preventable tragedy happen. Never.

“Oh, what is it? Did I forget something?”

Rei turned around beneath the moonlight.

There was Shiren, panting and out of breath. She must have really rushed to get this far. She was still in her pajamas.

But what was the plastic bat for? Maybe she was doing some nighttime practice.

“*Hah, hah*…I won’t let you…*hah, hah*…get to my big sis…”

“I have to. I must report to Her Majesty and retrieve some new study material. You need to work hard and get into Tokyo University. *Ehem, ehem!*”

“I can’t let you get to my sister. I won’t let that cursed item have its way!”

“‘Cursed item’? Why must you say things that trouble me so? Oh, I suppose you’re saying it out of spite for making you study. I don’t want that. I must do my job, which means getting to the emperor, *ehem, ehem*. I would be neglecting my duty if I didn’t.”

I won’t let you do your job.

“Let me say this again—I’m not letting you get any closer to my sister,

Chief of the Special Measures Division."

The color on Rei's face changed when she heard that, and the quiet night air became much more ominous.

"I wonder where you got that information. I thought I was strictly adhering to the public servants' obligations of confidentiality. I mean, if the civilians realized who I was, then they would all get frightened."

The society that regular, good-natured citizens saw was just the surface. Sleeping in the depths were truths that would give them chills. Things that shouldn't be—and it was Rei's duty to handle those.

"My, I thought I carried out my surveillance on Ryou two days ago perfectly. I was sad that he was taking a bath with another girl, though. Don't tell me you're from the other side, too?"

"You're the one doing things you could never tell God to his face, right? I'm impressed you found your way into the Empire."

"Ehem, ehem!"

After a brief, loud cough, Rei faced forward.

The look in her eyes was even more dangerous than a moment ago.

"Listen, do you think you could keep quiet about this? If you don't, I might have to silence you. I'm an administrator, so a mere bow of apology won't be enough. I'll need a little compensation."

"I won't tell anyone, so go back. And leave castle grounds immediately."

"I can't agree to that. I won't be able to accomplish my work unless I go to Her Majesty."

She had to reliably carry out the work required of her, even if someone else called it cruel. She had to have easy control over her emotions; otherwise, she couldn't be the chief of this Special Measures Division.

"I suppose we have a difference in views."

"I suppose so. Well, I'll be going to the emperor now."

Just as Rei turned to go to the castle—

—Shiren slammed the plastic bat over Rei's head.

"You think I'll let this curse have its way?!"

I'll protect Big Sis. I will. I sowed these seeds, after all.

Shiren didn't have a father or a mother. But she wasn't the only one who knew the pain of loss—Ouka was the same. It was because of all the loss they had been through that this country was born.

And yet, she had been wishing that her big sister would just go away.

No matter how annoying, how irritating she was, of course Shiren wouldn't be happy to lose her.

She acknowledged that she had made that stupid wish. After all, the pendant had glowed and was trying to fulfill its purpose even now.

She was going to stop the wish dead in its tracks. She would destroy that foolish side of herself and be a better person.

And in order to do that, she first had to stop Rei Asagiri.

She didn't know what her prospects of victory were. If Rei was thinking about assassinating Ouka, then she couldn't be a novice. But Shiren had no time to be afraid.

"And take this!" Shiren swung the plastic bat as hard as she could across Rei's back.

"*Ahem-ahem!* Guh!"

Rei flew forward, tumbled across the ground, hit a nearby tree, and stopped.

Shiren had made a good, clean hit.

"Huh? Was it supposed to be this easy?"

In all honesty, she thought Rei was going to stop her with one hand murmur *You're obstructing official government business*, and then strike her back. If this were an action manga, that's what would've happened. After all, finishing her off with one hit from behind wouldn't teach the kids any valuable lessons.

But reality was cruel—it seemed like she had dealt considerable damage.

She could probably fight like this until Rei gave up. And if there were actual guards around, then she probably wouldn't be able to reach Ouka.

But—

"Ouch, sheesh… *Ehem, ehem, ehem*…"

Rei stood, grimacing. It seemed she still had some fight in her.

"Ryou must hate living with a girl like you. You're a coward for striking me from behind!"

"Then I'll hit you from the front!"

And so Shiren whacked her again. Rei sailed through the air.

"*Eh*-hem! *Ehem*…"

The second attack was rather effective as well. Her life gauge was down

by half or so.

"Have you no standards…?"

But Rei stood up like it was nothing. She appeared to be in pain, but nowhere near giving up.

"Why are you okay? I'm going to hit you again. Doesn't it hurt? Aren't you scared? Aren't you going to at least try to run?"

There was something uncanny about Rei as she stood there, empty-handed, facing Shiren.

She was just like an undying wraith.

"I have a question—do you think normal people would be unharmed if they fell from a cliff?" Rei smiled a smile that belonged to someone from the underbelly of the world.

"Th-they'd definitely die. Even if they didn't, every bone in their body would be broken…"

"It's nighttime right now, so maybe you can see it if you squint, *ehem, ehem*."

Shiren squinted and stared at Rei, and then she noticed some kind of thin, transparent membrane all around her.

That membrane seemed to be moving ever so slightly, almost like an underwater jellyfish.

"What is that veil thing…?"

"It's not a veil; they're enraged spirits. I guess you could call it the rough and violent side of nature. If you consider human souls and other spirits a part of nature, which I do. *Ehem, ehem!*" Rei coughed somewhat proudly. "They protect me. That's why I can live a healthy life despite being so sickly, *ehem, ehem*!" Rei smiled triumphantly.

With this power, she had won battle after battle with the dark side of society.

"An invisible force truly is protecting me. I said that ghosts like me, didn't I?"

"I knew this wasn't going to go that easily."

"Did you hear about Grandpa? That he cursed Ryou to be attractive to human girls?"

"Yeah, no one recognized him as human for years, right?"

"Yes, it means he was far removed from humanity. He's so powerful—he's still alive, and people like him have special abilities. I have inherited

his blood. The enraged spirits took hold of me when I was young, and they have been with me ever since. And so even though I suffer wounds that might kill the average person, I simply recover in a few hours—*ehem, ehem, ehem, ehem, ehem*! I've been talking for so long that I can't stop coughing! *Ehem, ehem, ehem, ehem, ehem! Ehem, ehem, ehem, ehem, ehem, ehem, ehem, ehem!*"

*Rei continued coughing for a while. Please wait a moment.

"*Ehem, ehem…* Whew, I'm glad that's over. This means that you cannot stop me. It's like fighting an enemy with infinite HP. Give up and go home. I still have work to do!"

You think I'll let you do your work?

"*You* give up!" Shiren shouted and hit her with the bat again. That was all she could really do.

No matter how much recovery power Rei had, it couldn't be infinite. Shiren had to believe that as she fought.

"Enraged Punch."

Rei made a fist with her right hand and extended it about four inches in front of her.

It was a leisurely action, more like reaching out than throwing a punch. It didn't feel like she had intended to strike anyone, at least, and there wasn't anything four inches in front of her. Shiren was farther away than that.

But an intense shock still ran through Shiren's stomach.

"Agh! Gaaaaaaaaaaah!"

It felt like a blast of wind had collided with her. She was the one sent flying this time, and she tumbled along the ground until she suddenly stopped with a jolt of pain to her back. She had collided with a wall or something.

"Since I can't make excuses about being nonviolent anymore, I used the spirits. Could you tell? I can rip you to shreds without even touching you. You could never win against someone like me. Some things in the world simply cannot be accomplished, and you should acknowledge that. The Sarano family might be incredible, but so is the Asagiri family!"

But Shiren stood. She had to. She wasn't done carrying out her mission.

"Shut up… Ryouta is the only one who gets to lecture me!"

"And you're at it again. You truly are dense! You still believe that

someone will recognize you for your efforts if you just work hard, don't you? Didn't you know? The world doesn't reward hard work. If you don't have the results to prove your effort, you'll be out of the race. I have some subordinates who work ten times harder than I do, but they can never be more accomplished or more important than I am. I hate to say it, but you should acknowledge that effort does not directly translate to skill and just relax. Otherwise, you'll be hurt over and over again, and life's no fun that way."

"I'm well aware."

Shiren held the plastic bat in front of her again. "That's why I just keep getting back up until I see results! I refuse to admit defeat after I've worked so hard!"

"I don't understand how high schoolers think nowadays." Rei's spirits started gathering before her. "*Eh-hem, ehem.* Well, then I'll show you how hard it is in the real world. Enraged Punch."

Everything after that was hell.

Every strike was pure pain.

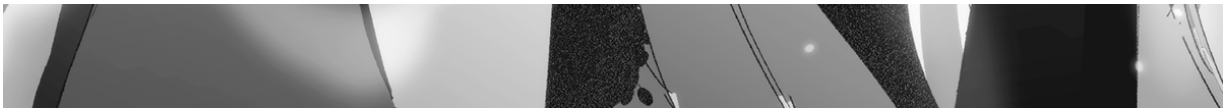
Even though Shiren could never get close to Rei, each blow slammed her against the ground.

The hells that Alfoncina had talked about were all kind of silly, but Shiren doubted those could actually exist. Being alive was painful enough as is. Or maybe it was because life was so painful that hell was designed to be a relative break.

After launching Shiren into the air with her spirit strikes about fifteen times, Rei let up a little. She wasn't even out of breath; of course she wouldn't be tired after such a relaxed attack.

In an extreme case, Rei could still sit down if she got tired, punch and kick that way, and she would still win. She was being protected by invisible entities—she had no openings.

©Hiroki Ozaki



“Listen, I know you’re still in high school, so let me give you some advice. These days, there’s no benefit to trying your best if you don’t have a plan. People without plans will get nowhere in the world, and the most talented people create plans so that they won’t even have to lift a finger*ehem, ehem, ehem, ehem!* The cough is back! *Ehhhem, ehem, ehem, ehem, ehem, ehem, ehem, ehem, ehem, ehem, ehem, ehem!!!!!*”

“Yeah… But now that I’m here, I have no choice but to do what I came to do, even without a plan.”

Blood was starting to drip from her arms and knees. Her clothes were torn. It was a little embarrassing, but now was not the time to feel ashamed.

“Listen, I will be blunt. The enraged spirits use natural forces other than their own, so they can’t take things in moderation. They can’t just go slowly to knock someone out. *Ehem, ehem, ehem!* Basically, what I’m trying to say is—” With a cool look, Rei glared at Shiren. “—I might end up killing you.”

“Yeah, threatening me like that is not going to work…”

She couldn’t stand the taste of blood in her mouth.

She did like blood, since she was a Sacred Blooded, but she didn’t like the taste of her own.

“If I was afraid of dying, my big sister might die instead!”

She never thought for a moment that dying for a loved one would be cool.

She would do whatever she had to, even if she had to grovel or let someone step on her head; she would much prefer to save Ouka’s life while keeping her own.

But it was her fault this time. She might end up causing the death of someone she loved.

Then there came footsteps that belonged to neither Rei nor Shiren.

“Shiren, you’re alive! I’m not done serving you yet, am I?”

Shiren smiled wryly on the inside— *You could’ve come a little sooner.*

“*Phew…* Did I make it? I’m not too late, am I?”

Just as Ryouta arrived, he leaned forward on his sword like it was a cane.

Running at full speed tired him out. And the real show was just starting.

“I’m drenched in sweat. I guess I’ll take another bath when I get back. I don’t care who’s in there with me!”

“Ryouta, you’re…here.”

“You don’t seem all that happy to see me.”

Shiren had probably wanted to settle things on her own. “Both of our big sisters sure are a handful, huh?” she said.

“You can say that again.”

Shiren still had enough strength to be making jokes.

“Rei, I’m sorry, but both Shiren and I have to stop you. You’d understand if you lived here, too—the Sacred Blooded are just like us. There’s no need to kill them.”

“What…? What are you trying to say, Ryou? I just don’t understand. Don’t get in my way! Adults have work to do!”

“And we have to get in the way of your work.” Ryouta slowly held up his sword to point it at Rei. “Please, Rei, just stand down.”

“Whaaat?! Ryou, why on Earth would you point something so dangerous at me? This is way beyond huffing paint thinner or riding around on motorcycles for fun! You can only be so much of a *Ryo*ngdoer!”

“I don’t want to be a wrongdoer. That’s why I’m asking you to step down.”

“Oh, whatever! Enraged Punch and Kick!”

An invisible force Ryouta had never experienced before swarmed Shiren and him.

It was 30 percent stronger than it had been before.

Both of them rose into the air like an invisible giant had caught hold of them.

The next thing they knew, they were falling faceup toward the ground. They both hit the ground with a painful impact.

“Crap… What is this…?”

“Rei’s using invisible things called enraged spirits on us.”

“Seriously…? That’s against the rules… What are you, Rei…? I had no idea.”

While he didn’t believe someone without any superpowers could get this far into the country, there was only so much he could believe.

“Well, if I told you I had this power, you’d be shocked. I don’t want you to hate me…*ehem*.”

“I’m not going to hate you, so could you stop this…?” And just as Ryouta tried to stand, he realized how badly hurt his legs were. He had no idea what had attacked them, so he hadn’t been able to defend himself. “I’m not sure why I came all the way here if we were just going to end up like this anyway…”

“Don’t say that. It’s tremendously helpful just to have you with me,” Shiren whispered beside him.

It didn’t change their overwhelming disadvantage, but both Shiren and Ryouta were slightly relieved.

They had experienced mortal combat before.

In fact, they had survived that deadly battle together before.

“Hey, Shiren, did you make any progress on your own?”

“If I did, I wouldn’t be in this sorry state.”

“Fair.”

Shiren pointed to Ryouta’s elbow. Blood was slowly seeping from it. “Hey, I think it’s almost time for you to serve me.”

“Yeah… I don’t think we have any other choice, do we?” Ryouta extended his arm.

Slowly, Shiren bit into it.

“Ah! That is inappropriate for high schoolers!” Rei cried, but they paid her no mind.

This was a sacred ritual.

One to birth the Goddess.

Bit by bit, changes started appearing throughout Shiren’s body.

First her eyes turned red.

Then her pajamas tore, and a pair of massive wings unfurled behind her.

When the Sacred Blooded drank the blood of their beloved, their physical prowess heightened temporarily.

But it didn’t stop there for Shiren, who had royal blood flowing through her veins.

Her wings were like those of the Goddess of Blood he saw in the First Cathedral and in the castle.

The ancient, menacing power of the Sacred Blooded still remained within royalty.

“I’m not responsible for whatever happens. Now that I’m like this, I can’t control my power, either.”

“Just don’t kill my sister.”

Ryouta could only pray. In the end, he was simply a normal person. He couldn’t even put a scratch on a magic user.

“Wh-what is this? Is today an unlucky day? Oh, I’m getting slower… and everyone’s mad at me…*ehem, ehem*.”

“Now’s not the time to be disappointed!”

Shiren charged forward with incredible speed compared to earlier. She soared like an eagle.

With this power, she had beaten back Sasara with shocking ease. It was easy, merciless, like a human squishing an ant. Sasara’s skill with a sword had been powerless against her.

“Ohhh, I’m so scared, so I’ll use all my strength and… Enraged Punch!”

A gale of wind collided with Shiren. Afterward, she felt a shock like a car ramming into her.

She could take it, but she couldn’t completely defend against it.

“Rgh! I can’t stop it!”

Even though she was awakened, she still lost to Rei’s strength.

She was slammed against the wall with unbelievable force. Had she not been transformed, she would have died instantly.

“Urgh… Th-this is unfair…”

Shiren’s transformation faded as she groaned in agony. Blood poured from a gash in her arm.

“What? No way… She couldn’t stop it even in that form…”

Ryouta’s mind went blank. In that form, Shiren had crushed Imperial Guard Sasara in an instant. But if she couldn’t stop Rei, then in the worst-case scenario, there was no one in this castle who could.

“Well, I am an administrator, so of course I can do at least that much, *ehem*. Well now, I’ll be on my way, finally. *Sigh*, I don’t get paid for overtime in an admin position…”

Rei turned her back on the two and walked off like nothing happened.

She was unbelievably powerful.

“No, this… Big Sis…”

Shiren bit her lip.

Rei Asagiri was truly the curse herself. No matter how they struggled against her, they couldn’t stop her. The curse was inevitable.

But Rei then froze in her tracks.

“I thought I heard some commotion, and here I find you making a mess of another person’s garden. *Siiigh*, I’ll have to raise taxes again to repair this.”

Walking up the path was none other than Ouka herself.

“Oh, Your Majesty…”

Rei went pale.

“Big Sis, stay back! She’ll kill you! She’s some kind of Special Ops Division boss! And you have a necklace curse on you!”

“Ouka, get out of here! Get help from everyone you can! At least a hundred or two hundred people!”

When they shouted at her, Ouka sighed. “I more or less understand what happened. Humans are terrible at tricks. Isn’t that right, Rei Asagiri?”

“Ah, ahhh, ahhhhhh… This, um…”

Rei had gone completely pale. It was probably Ouka’s regal presence that caused it. But her presence wasn’t enough to stop Rei.

“I don’t need your excuses. But we do have to settle this. There is a heavy price to pay for the crime of hurting the one I love, after all.”

Ouka had said it loud and clear—“the one I love.”

Despite the whole situation, Ryouta’s heart was pounding like crazy. The otherwise ordinary phrase sounded divine coming from Ouka.

But Ouka passed right by the collapsed Ryouta—

“You’re in rough shape. And you’re bleeding.”

—and stood before Shiren.

“Oh, Big Sis…” As the one who had cursed Ouka, Shiren had to apologize quickly.

If not, then their time would run out.

But Ouka didn’t give her a chance. “Shiren, I’m going to drink your blood.” Ouka knelt, took Shiren’s arm, and licked at the blood.

One lick, two licks, and then a third.

It wasn’t alluring so much as it was hallowed and discreet.

“I suppose that should be good enough.”

In the next moment, white wings rose from Ouka’s back.

They didn’t sprout from her like Shiren’s did; Ouka’s dress remained undamaged.

It was like all the particles in the air came together in the shape of wings.

“Wh—? Big Sis, why…?”

“I am of royal blood, too. This is what happens when I awaken. Is there something wrong?”

“But an awakening from drinking blood is just supposed to happen from someone you love, though…”

It couldn’t be just anyone’s blood; an awakening had restrictions.

“I love my little sister.”

Could there be any other reason?

She didn’t even have to say it now; Shiren was Ouka’s one and only irreplaceable little sister, and she loved her dearly. That was why Ouka had no intention of letting Rei go.

“Rei Asagiri, you’ll have to face severe punishment.” Ouka slowly turned toward Rei. Her enormous wings fluttered.

“No, Ouka! Shiren was no match for her, not even transformed! Rei has rage spirits on her side!”

There was no way they could win unless they did something about those spirits.

“Who cares about a few spirits?”

Ryouta doubted his own eyes.

Ouka’s wings took the form of a creature that opened its mouth, bit down onto Rei’s spirits, and swallowed them.

“She—she’s eating the spirits!”

That was enough to petrify Rei with fright.

“*Eh-hem…ehem…* My spirits…”

“This is the awakening of the Sacred Blood Emperor. Did you think that growing wings and becoming just a little stronger was enough to earn the reverence of my ancestors?”

©Hiroki Ozaki

Ryouta remembered the words *vengeful god*.

No one could truly control something like this. Before a force that could consume their very souls, people could only stay silent and pray.

"Well then, it's time to punish you."

Nom.

The wing mouth chomped down on Rei.

"Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!!!!"

A single bite was enough to knock her out, and she collapsed.

"Well, I guess that's that. She might die if she exerts herself while her spirits are weakened."

Ouka brushed her hands together, like she had just gone through a stack of papers. Her wings vanished into the night.

Both Ryouta and Shiren were speechless. Ouka was OP as hell. Rei's power was excessive, but Ouka was practically god-tier. With that kind of power, everything would have turned out fine if Ouka had just showed up at the start…

Wait, but she needed the blood of a loved one to awaken.

Then what Shiren had done wasn't entirely for nothing.

But then a mystery that Ryouta would never ask about came to mind.

If Ouka drank my blood, would she transform…?

There was no way that Ouka and he could share the bond of sisterly love. They probably didn't have the love between master and servant, either.

But if she could transform because of it, then it would prove another type of love that…

"Okay, that's settled. Shiren, tell me what happened."

"That Rei girl is the head of the Special Measures Division from the city of Oshiro! That's how she got into Empire territory by falling from the cliff. She was pretending to be looking for Ryouta, but she was really after you!"

"Mm-hmm. And what is this cursed-necklace business? I thought I heard you mention something like that." It was very much like Ouka to go straight for the truth that a person wanted to hide.

"It's because… I had so many study books, I ended up cursing you with a necklace I had…"

She of course hid the part about romance.

"Oh, that thing Alfoncina has, right? Okay, I get it, I get it. Now, it

would be unfair if I didn't hear the other side." Ouka poked the collapsed Rei with her finger.

"Ehem, ehem…"

"Seems like you're awake. Tell me everything. Or I'll eat you whole."

"U-um… Just as I was going to retrieve more books from you, Your Majesty, your younger sister interrupted me, and then Ryou came… Both of them said that they wouldn't let me see you… I had no choice but to Enraged Punch them…"

"Were you planning on killing me or anything?"

Rei vigorously shook her head. "Of course not! I could never do anything so frightening! I am your faithful ninja, Lady Ouka!"

"Yes, you are. If not, then I'll have to expose all that Ryouta stuff you brought in."

"S-stop*ehemehem*!"

"—So there you have it."

"What does this mean?!"

All Ryouta understood was that Ouka was involved somehow.

"Basically, Rei Asagiri has been captain of my ninja squad for a while now."

"Then was the whole Special Chief thing a hoax?"

"She did originally come in from the mountains to see what the castle was up to as the Special Measures chief, it seems. But she was attacked by an Asian giant hornet, and I collected her when she was on the verge of death. I knew who she was right away. I mean, her bag was filled with Ryouta—"

"*Ehem, ehem, ehem, ehem*, oh, my chronic cough! *Ehem, ehem, ehem!*"

For some reason, Rei's cough sounded less convincing this time.

"And so Rei has been working as a ninja ever since. I am definitely not blackmailing her."

Rei was definitely being blackmailed. Was she a double agent now?

"So when she fell from the cliff, that was because she was watching from up there, got the wrong idea, and then fell…? Now that I think about it, what I sensed two days ago at home must have been her, too…"

"That's right, *ehem*!"

He thought he saw Ouka glare at Rei for a split second, but he must have imagined it.

In summary, Rei had been acting as surveillance in case anything happened. She was there to make sure that the emperor was never alone with anyone.

Well, yeah. She is *the emperor…*

He would never tell anyone how ever-so-slightly disappointed he was.

"But why did you try to hide that you were working as a ninja? Oh, because of the black—"

"Ehem, ehem, ehem, ehem! Eh-hem, eh-hem!"

"Fine. I won't ask. But in conclusion, everyone ended up in a terrible situation because we didn't know the truth…"

"Seriously. I'm a mess, thanks to you…"

Shiren, the biggest victim here, was rather angry. But she wasn't allowed to complain too much because there was still the matter of the necklace.

"…But I'm glad the necklace curse didn't come true…"

Enough had been resolved that she could sweep the rest under the rug.

Then an expensive-looking, all-black car pulled up.

It stopped, and Alfoncina stepped out. She must have had one of her minions drive.

"Oh, Ouka, I came to show you some new samples. The design on this one is lovely, and I think it's *perfect*!"

Alfoncina produced the cursed necklace in question. It came in at least five different colors.

"Huh, I guess they do look nicer than before."

"No! That's the cursed necklace!" Shiren interjected, having just endured the pain. She knew more than anyone else just how frightening that necklace could be.

"Yes. I thought it might be a big hit if I sold it under that name…"

"Wait. What do you mean, 'name'?"

"Well, *charms* only express good luck, so I wondered if pushing the opposite would sell at all."

"Is it actually cursed?"

"No," she answered immediately. "But I wondered if buzzwords like that would be more of a hit… You were my guinea pig, Shiren. How was it?"

"Awful."

At that moment, the pendant stone glinted faintly. They were outside at

night, so she could easily see.

“Oh, the LED inside shines like that sometimes. Gives a little flash. This will definitely sell!”

“Matsuko Kimura, I am never making an offering to your cathedral ever again.”

“Don’t use my real name! Why are you so angry?!”

“Silence, Matsuko.”

Her old-fashioned name echoed through the night sky. It was briefly amusing—but not really.

“Oh, by the way, Shiren, about the curse.”

Shiren’s shoulders shot up, tensed. She had created a fatal debt for herself.

To be blunt, she was afraid of Ouka. This was unbelievably awkward.

“Oh, uh, um… What is it, Big Sis?”

“I’m not going to go easy on you just because you’re my little sister. The real game starts now, so you need to be ready.”

“I—I know… I’m not going to get help from dubious objects.”

Ouka patted Shiren’s head.

“Eek!” Shiren had such a hard time reading what her sister was up to.

“That’s the spirit. Perfect, my beloved little sister.” Ouka’s laugh was jovial but also slightly mischievous.

All’s well that ends well, as they say. Ouka had even told Shiren she loved her.

“I guess you’ll always be you, Big Sis.”

Shiren thought about studying a little more in order to be more like her, but she took it back in three seconds. That was a separate issue.

But then malice filled the air.

What was it this time…?

“I sensed you were in danger, Lady Ouka, so I rushed over! The woman is the insurgent, is she not?!” Sasara rushed over in full armor, sword at the ready.

“You could tell? I never had any intention of calling you over.”

“I can feel your love through telepathy, Lady Ouka.”

That was an annoying power. What about personal privacy?

“Oh, Sasara, we already settled everything, so—”

Another dangerous person arrived.

“Death is the only option for those who hurt my dearest Ryouta!”

This time it was Kiyomizu who rushed over, dagger in hand.

“You sure sound like you knew this whole time that I was hurt, Kiyomizu.”

“I listen in on everything you say, my love!”

At least she wasn’t listening in with telepathic powers.

Sasara and Kiyomizu both turned to Rei.

“Ahhhh! They’re coming after me, aren’t they?! I don’t like this!”

“You there, woman, prepare yourself!”

“You will be punished!”

I’m tired; just do whatever you want, Ryouta thought.

“S-someone help meeeeeeeeeeee!!! *Ehem, ehem, ehem!*”

NINE-TO-ELEVEN

A convenience store in the Sacred Blood Empire. It is independently run, not a part of a franchise or chain, and carries food, daily necessities, magazines, and whatnot.

©Hiroki Ozaki

EPILOGUE

©Hiroki Ozaki

EPILOGUE

"*Sigh*… She got me."

Ouka sat before her desk in her room and grumbled, which was unlike her.

"That Rei Asagiri…"

She had made absolutely sure that she had everyone out of the way when she created a situation for herself to confess her feelings.

That was including the ninjas.

In short, Rei Asagiri had fallen from the cliff to stop her from doing so. She truly was risking her life for love.

"I was underestimating Ryouta's big sister this whole time."

There was no question that there would be even more troublesome enemies to come.

"But I'll be the one to have the last laugh."

Ouka looked to the picture frame on her desk with a smile. Inside was a photo of Ouka and Ryouta from elementary school.

"—Because we're old friends."

©Hiroki Ozaki

Everything ended peacefully.

So much had happened, but it was truly a relief that no one ended up dying (though there were a few close calls).

“Whew, this peace is perfect. After dinner, I’m just going to hang out and read manga. This is the best!”

“You should at least study a little for your future, though.”

It was Monday night. Shiren had been lazing around the whole time. Ryouta, as always, was taking care of all the household chores.

Last time, the arrival of so many transfer students at school had created chaos, but of course, Rei was much too old to join a high school class. She didn’t even join the school as a teacher. It was truly a huge relief.

“Ryouta, throw away that mountain of study books later. They’re an eyesore.”

“You really need to take better care of things.”

“The most basic of basics in the art of rearranging is throwing away things we don’t need. Don’t you know that?!”

“You insist that you’ll never use them, which makes me not want to respect you anymore.”

“Speaking of, where is Rei living?”

“She got a house somewhere, apparently. I don’t really know the details.”

He thought he might have been a little too blunt when it came to his own family, but she had been glued to him until now, so Ryouta wanted some space.

In that sense, as long as she didn’t come to visit him, maybe she’d learn to let her little brother have his own life.

He wanted her to graduate from her obsession with him while they were in this land full of Sacred Blooded. Because of her powers, he doubted that a Sacred Blooded would drink her blood and turn her into a minion.

And then the doorbell rang.

“Ryouta, I just got a really bad feeling.”

“What a coincidence—me, too.”

Either way, he couldn’t not answer, so he went to the front door.

He knew when it was Rei.

“Oh, I am Rei Asagiri, sent by Her Majesty to officially act as Shiren’s tutor starting today. I’ll be coming every day!”

“Once a year is fine. Think of it like your birthday.”

“Oh, I’m not planning on coming every night to protect your chastity or anything, Ryou. *Ehem.*”

“Or maybe you can come once every four years. Like the Olympics.”

He was terrified of the idea that his entire family would soon start coming over…

As he stared at the tutor in front of him, Ryouta held that fear deep in his heart.

AFTERWORD

Good evening, this is Morita.

I'm not saying *hello* because I'm writing this at night. If you start reading this afterword at around nine at night, it will feel like you're reading it live, so I think that might be the best way to enjoy it.

Now, this is unusual, but I am going to start this afterword with an announcement.

I'm getting married.

Just kidding.

I'm really just kidding. It came out of nowhere. I'm not even seeing anyone right now. I wish I was, though. Okay, on the next line, I'll make the real announcement.

We're producing a drama CD for *You Call That Service?* The cast is as follows—

Akiko Hasegawa as Shiren
Yui Horie as Ouka
Koji Takahashi as Ryouta
Kana Asumi as Kiyomizu
Miyu Matsuki as Tamaki
Yuka Iguchi as Sasara
Hitomi Nabatame as Alfoncina

This sounds unbelievable, but it is true. It's *glorious*. But I sometimes wonder if this is okay, since this is a novel with so many characters that will make it hard to transfer it to mixed media.

The release date is slated to be on November 25. To be honest, I thought, *Are you out of your mind, GA Bunko?* But please look forward to it!

If I knew this was going to happen, I would've had Kiyomizu and Alfoncina say naughtier things… Oh, what? Nothing. It's nothing. Nothing at all.

Now, I think drama CDs typically reproduce the entirety of the first volume, but the main story will still continue. Now we have more characters, so it feels like the story is getting a little saturated, but we're managing to make do.

By the way, I'm writing this in _____ (I'll let your imagination decide what month it is), and I still haven't turned the AC on in my room yet. When I write it like this, you might think, *Wow, you're working so hard to save energy! So economical! Marry me!* But I usually spend an average year without ever turning it on. It's just how I am.

And so one time, my electricity bill was so low, I started to doubt if I really lived here at all. This carried over from my days as a poor college student living off _____ yen a month (I'll let your imagination decide how much that is).

And because of that, I was living in a near non-existent life, and now we come to the present. To all the middle and high schoolers reading this: Please go out there and experience life when you get to college. You really, really should. And even if people online are jealous, you definitely should.

Actually, a book depicting such a tragic college life, one that I'm not sure who might benefit from it, will be coming out the same month as this book.

The book is called *The Stranger's Everything*, published by Seikaisha.

It is a full novel, so it might cost about the same as two light novels, but please do check this out as well if you're interested. And even though it is a novel, there are gorgeous illustrations as well.

If you're already older than a college student and you still don't have a life, then I think you might be able to sympathize with this book, so please find it in your local bookstore.

I also took part in this month's *YuruYuri* novel anthology, so please check that out, too.

And now it's time for our usual acknowledgment hour.

Hiroki Ozaki, thank you as always for the illustrations that went above and beyond my expectations. Thank you especially for the bath time images. Thank you *especially* for the bath time images.

To my editor S, those in design, in sales—thank you all so much this time around. It's thanks to all of you that Morita just barely manages to earn enough to eat. And special thanks to everyone else who had a hand in this

book and to all my readers. I will be off to Heisenji Hakusan Shrine in Fukui to pray for everyone's good luck.

Well then, I will see you all in the third volume!

You Call That Service? Q&A

■ Question for Rei
Can you sing the "Doraemon Song"?

Ehem ehem ehem, ehem ehem ehem
Ehem ehem ehem ehem, eh-hem ehem, eheeem
Ehem ehem ehem, ehem ehem ehem, ehem ehem eh-hem,
ehem ehem eh-heeem Ehem eeehem, ehem eh-hem,
'Ehem! Ehehehem!' Eh-he-hem, eh-hem,
eh-hem, ehem eh-hem~ ♪

Incredible! You sang the whole thing without creating copyright infringement!

■ Question for Tamaki
What is happiness?

UM.....
.....
.....
..... O-OH..... I DON'T KNOW.....

I'm sorry! I'm sorry you got such an awful question!

■ **Question for Shiren**
What has been the most interesting manga you've read lately?

It has to be Kin Hayashimori's *You're Rouko, I'm Kouko!* At first, the jokes themselves are rather surreal, so it might seem like it's targeting a very specific audience, but the characters are drawn cute so that the work is more widely accessible. Also, minor characters like Sonko have stories that are genuinely fleshed out, so it almost makes me want to create side stories about them myself. This is Hayashimori's first serialized work, and I think everyone has high hopes for this newcomer.

You're way too into this!

■ **Question for Kiyomizu**
Can you tell us a little more about your organization, the Virginal Father?

I love you from the bottom of my heart, Ryouta, my dearest!

Don't ignore the question!

■ **Question for Sasara**
I'll ask straight up—do you want to do naughty stuff with Ouka?

YES!

You're so loud!

©Hiroki Ozaki

Thank you for buying this ebook, published by Yen On.

To get news about the latest manga, graphic novels, and light novels from Yen Press, along with special offers and exclusive content, sign up for the Yen Press newsletter.

Sign Up

Or visit us at www.yenpress.com/booklink